

COLLEGE FOOTBALL PREVIEW

Sporting News

SEE A DIFFERENT GAME

TOP DAWGS!

Get to know No. 1 Georgia
and its BCS challengers

PLUS

- Game-breakers
- Conference predictions
- Bowl projections

SN's top 10

1. Georgia
2. Ohio State
3. USC
4. Oklahoma
5. LSU
6. Missouri
7. Clemson
8. West Virginia
9. Florida
10. Illinois

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Week of August 18, 2008

NFL: Can Brett
handle the Big Apple?

RB Knowshon Moreno,
Georgia Heisman hopeful



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MAGAZINE

THIS WEEK

24

We're picking Illinois to finish second in the Big Ten, but with a guy like Arrelious Benn on the field, you never know what will happen.



COVER STORY

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10 On your marks ...

Last season was crazy out of the gate: After Appalachian State beat Michigan, 19 more top 10 teams lost to unranked teams. Seven No. 2 teams lost. The top two teams lost in the final week. So what can we expect this time around?

12 Why Georgia will win it all

This season, there's no better place to be than between the hedges. *By Dave Curtis.* Plus, five others who *could* win it.

24 The game-breakers

Every conference has the one guy who keeps defensive coordinators up at night. It takes more than just blazing speed to be that guy.

■ Plus, Instant Expert, bowl picks and a breakdown of every BCS conference.

> NFL

50 It's Mario's time

When Texans defensive end Mario Williams broke out with 14 sacks last season, he stuffed any bust talk for good. Now look what's on his to-do list. *By Steve Greenberg*

56 A brand-new start of it

The mental demands of playing in New York will be intense for a player who said he was spent five months ago, but—as always—Brett Favre seems ready to improvise. *By Matt Crossman*

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KNOW IT ALL

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- 5 **Your Turn** The Manny debate is heating up ... and so is football fever.
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- 8 **The coulda-shoulda Olympians** Four NBA stars would have looked good in red, white and blue.

INSIDER

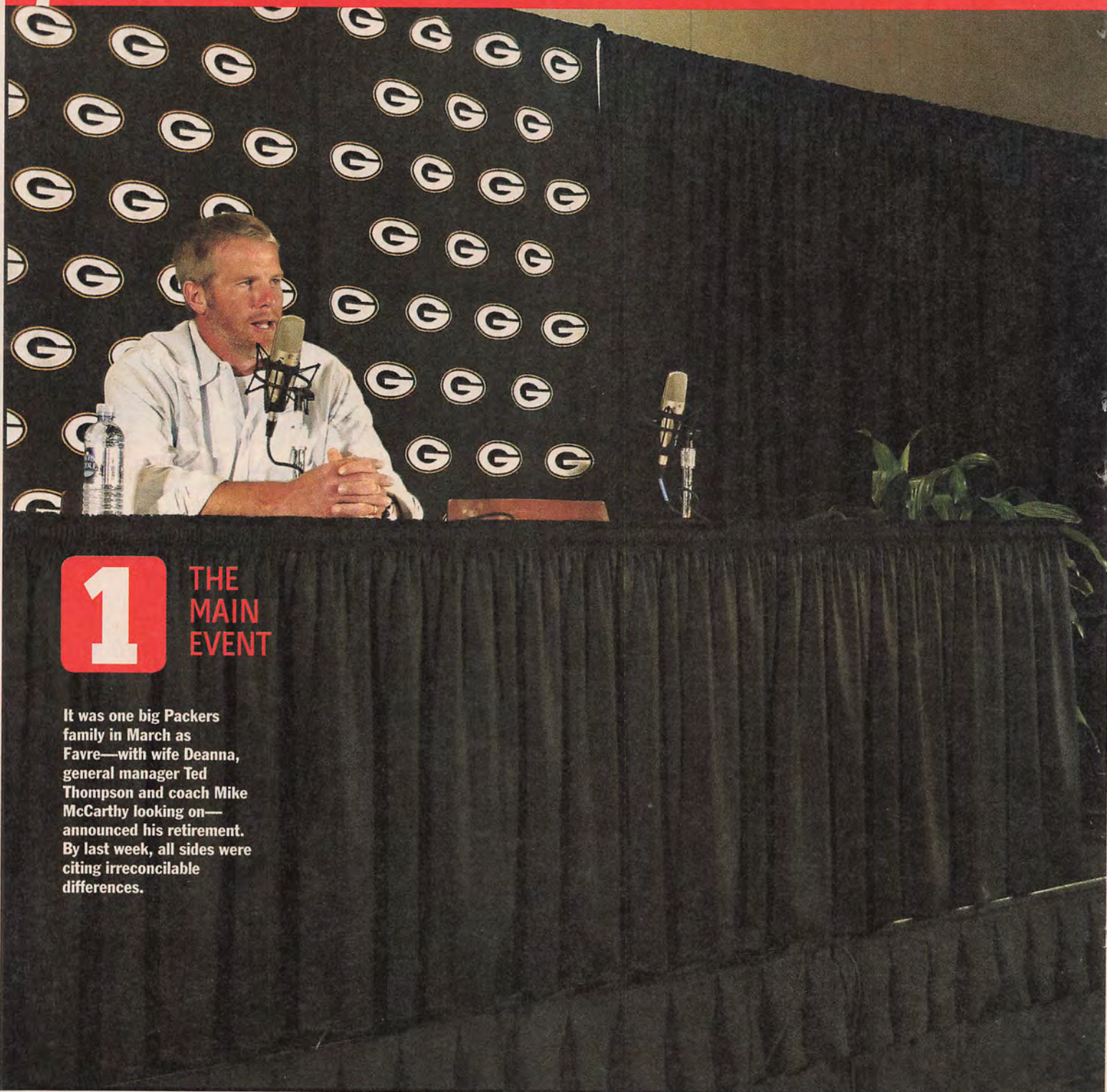
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COVER BY BOB LEVERONE / SN

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TO KNOW LIST

7 things to make you an INSTANT EXPERT this week

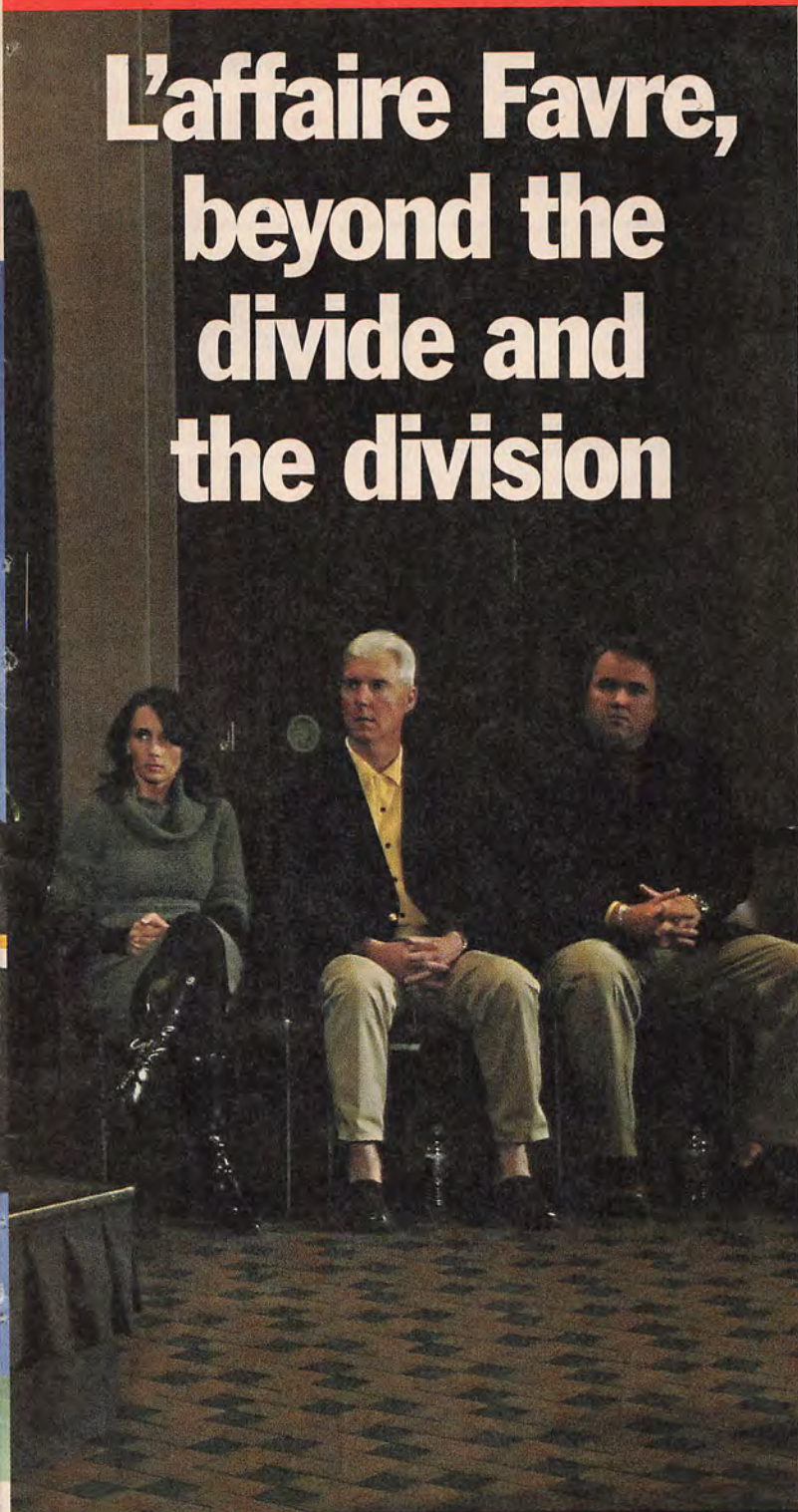


1

THE
MAIN
EVENT

It was one big Packers family in March as Favre—with wife Deanna, general manager Ted Thompson and coach Mike McCarthy looking on—announced his retirement. By last week, all sides were citing irreconcilable differences.

L'affaire Favre, beyond the divide and the division



Watching "old" highlights of Brett Favre overcome with joy in his Packers uniform feels like watching a family's home movies after a divorce. Everybody lost—the fans, the Packers and Favre. The only winners are other teams that will face a similar showdown in the future (although there will never be a showdown on this scale again). Those teams should thank Packers general manager Ted Thompson and team president Mark Murphy for not piling a final stupid mistake on top of all the other stupid mistakes they made.

Yes, Thompson and Murphy shoulder plenty of blame. But they stood strong on two crucial points: They refused to acquiesce to Favre's in-division trade demand, and they refused to release him. "The idea of trading him in the division would have been the last resort," Murphy says. "We wanted to avoid that at all cost. We were pleased it didn't come to that point."

Had they traded Favre within the NFC North or released him, there could have been wide-ranging implications—none of them good. Imagine "The Favre Rule": An athlete gets mad at his team, so he demands and gets his release or gets traded to the team of his choosing.

Yikes.

"We did not get any feedback from other owners about any precedent," Murphy says. "But certainly there was support from other owners that it was a pretty reasonable position that you didn't want to trade someone to a division opponent and then have to face them twice a year."

Rule No. 1 for athletes hoping to stay sane in the cutthroat world of professional sports: It's a business; don't take anything personally. But Favre took what the Packers did so personally that he could not play for them anymore. Perhaps that anger clouded his judgment. He didn't really think a trade to a rival was possible, did he?

"Maybe that was a little bit of a vindictive nature or competitive nature or whatever," Favre admitted after he was traded to the Jets (see page 56). "I think in the end that was probably the wrong motive, and I realized that was not going to happen."

Favre's best revenge will be playing well. He just won't get the chance to do it against the Packers. Not this year at least. —Matt Crossman

Contributing: Mark Kass

2 IN THE SPOTLIGHT Odds couple: Favre and the Jets

We'll have to wait to see how Brett Favre's acquisition affects the Jets' season. But his arrival quickly changed some betting lines in Las Vegas, according to RJ Bell of Pregame.com. The Jets' numbers before Favre's arrival and within 48 hours after it:

	Before Favre	After Favre
Odds of winning the Super Bowl	40-to-1	30-to-1
Projected victories in 2008	7	8.5
Spread for Week 1 vs. Miami	Jets -2.5	Jets -3

—Dennis Dillon



3

CIRCLE THE DATES

Series of the season

Yeah, yeah, technically, every game—in April and September—counts the same in the standings. But it's hard to beat a head-to-head matchup between division rivals with a playoff berth on the line. With roughly a quarter of the season to go, here are your for-instances:

■ **Dodgers at Diamondbacks (August 29-31).** "They have unbelievable pitching," Dodgers outfielder Andre Ethier says. Don't worry about the records—just know this battle for the N.L. West title will be a doozy ... and it carries over to a week later (September 5-7), when they meet again in L.A.

■ **Phillies at Mets (September 5-7).** There's no love lost between these two, but there is plenty of respect remaining. "They're a very talented team," Phillies short-stop Jimmy Rollins says, "and I think that's their biggest attribute."

■ **Rays at Red Sox (September 8-10).** Quite the brewing rivalry here, but if you miss this one—that you'd ever do *that*—don't worry. They play again a few days later (September 15-17) in St. Pete.

■ **White Sox at Twins (September 23-25).** All signs indicate this series will determine the A.L. Central title.

■ **Cubs at Brewers (September 26-28).** What better way to end the regular season than with a showdown between two N.L. Central rivals? Well, maybe Yankees at Red Sox the same three days. —Ryan Fagan

4

THE REST OF THE STORY

What in 'Tar Nation'?

You can still see George Brett storming out of the dugout in anger on July 24, 1983, after umpire Tim McClelland had called him out and nullified his go-ahead home run. But do you remember what happened next? Long story short: The Yankees were declared the winners of the game, but the Royals won the protest. McClelland was overruled, and ...

The "pine tar game"—ruled suspended at the point of the call—was completed 25 years ago this week, on August 18, 1983.

Yankees ace Ron Guidry played center field in part because the guy who had been playing there, Jerry Mumphy, had been traded, but also as a form of protest by New York manager Billy Martin. Either way, Guidry didn't have to make a play. Hal McRae struck out to end the Royals' top of the ninth, and Dan Quisenberry set down the Yankees in order. The whole thing took 12 minutes. The Royals won, 5-4. —Matt Crossman

5

QUICK CLICKS

The basketball diaries

If it's hard-core analysis of Team USA's performance at the Olympics you want, better look somewhere else, bub. But if you think you'd enjoy some real insights into the Beijing experience of the Dream Team—No. 5, is it?—then log on to syracuse.com/orangebasketball and find Jim Boeheim's blog. Yes, Jim Boeheim's blog. What is this world coming to?

"We went out to a local restaurant on Monday night and finally ate a Chinese meal. It wasn't like a P.E. Chang's; it was, you know, more Chinese. They didn't serve us snake and stuff like that, but it wasn't like back home at all," Syracuse's 63-year-old coach, an assistant to Mike Krzyzewski in Beijing, wrote last week.

"It was just us coaches. The players ate at places like California Pizza Kitchen and Tony Roma's, which they've been doing all along. They don't know what they missed."

Nor will you if you don't keep up with Jimmy B.

—Steve Greenberg

2

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

6 Drivers who have won at least one of the last five races before the

Chase but failed to qualify for the Chase in the four years the controversial points system has been used on NASCAR's Sprint Cup circuit. Greg Biffle won at Michigan in 2004 and Kyle Busch won at California in 2005, but both finished far out of the running for the 10-race Chase. Last weekend's Cup event at Watkins Glen, won by Busch, kicked off the five-race countdown to the Chase.

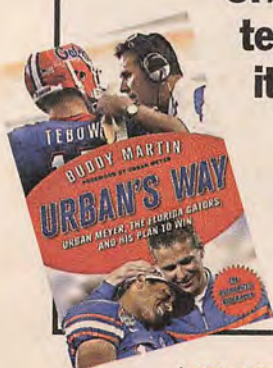
—Matt Crossman

7

IT BEARS REPEATING

'It was a bad deal. It will forever be in the mind of Urban Meyer and our football team. We'll handle it, and it's going to be a big deal.'

—Florida football coach Urban Meyer, in his soon-to-be-released autobiography *Urban's Way*, on Georgia's whole-team touchdown celebration last season. For more on No. 1 Georgia and its 2008 season—including a certain rivalry game—turn to Page 12.



YOUR TURN

BLOG ON

From your blogs on sportingnews.com

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Manny Ramirez (SN, August 11) is the best thing to happen to the Dodgers since Vin Scully was born.

—Matt Alford via email

■ As a lifelong Red Sox fan, it broke my heart to see the final outcome of “Manny being Manny.” It seems everyone is ripping on Boston for moving him, but the club did the right thing for the long-term success and sanity of the other 24 players.
—Chris Monko via e-mail

■ When someone brings up Michael Jordan, do you think of the six championships in Chicago or the two years of mediocrity in Washington? I’ll always remember Brett Favre (SN, August 11) as the Packers’ three-time MVP quarterback who brought the Lombardi Trophy back to Titledown.
—Alex Conover via e-mail

■ Deanna Favre must be ecstatic. She won’t have to put up with Brett moping around the house for the next six months. —Mark D. Tasch via e-mail

■ Matt Crossman’s story on the coaching Garrett family (SN, August 4) was wonderful. To read how Jim Sr., his “angel” of a wife and the entire Garrett family has impacted so many lives through football

and everyday life lessons is truly heartwarming.
—Dennis Holtgraewe via e-mail

■ One day, Justin Boren (SN, August 4) will be forced to work with a person or people who do not mesh with his style of “family values” or “respect,” and the opportunity to leave or change will not be available. Then we will all see whether college has prepared this young man for the real world.
—Roger P. Elle via e-mail

■ Anyone who thinks you can come back from an ACL injury and not be affected is either nuts or has never experienced it himself. Take it to the bank: Philip Rivers (SN, August 4) will suffer this year (mentally), and his production will be affected.
—zman010246 via SportingNews.com

■ Do academics hurt athletics? Sadly, in Matt Hayes’ ugly six of broken-down programs (SN, August 4)—Duke, Stanford, Minnesota, Syracuse, Baylor and Vanderbilt—it looks like they do.
—hi10spro via SportingNews.com

RE: THE OL’ BRAWL GAME

Posted by Michigan Master AA

Steve Smith punched teammate Ken Lucas in the nose after a heated discussion. Smith was suspended for two games and later apologized to Lucas, who accepted and is now saying the event will help team chemistry. Then, Prince Fielder shoved pitcher Manny Parra a couple of times in a dugout altercation. Fielder apologized for his actions, and manager Ned Yost and his team say it’s no big deal. These types of things are said to benefit a team’s drive, but it shouldn’t have to come down to fighting a teammate to instill passion in your players.

RE: FAN (MIS)CONDUCT

Posted by The Bone Zone

Let us look at the NFL’s new code of conduct for fans more closely: You will be banned for ... behavior that is unruly, disruptive or illegal; drunkenness or signs of alcohol impairment that result in irresponsible behavior; foul or abusive language or obscene gestures; verbal or physical harassment of fans from other teams; interference in the progress of the game (throwing objects onto the field). This is the funniest thing I have ever heard. Any or all of these things happen about every two minutes in every NFL game!

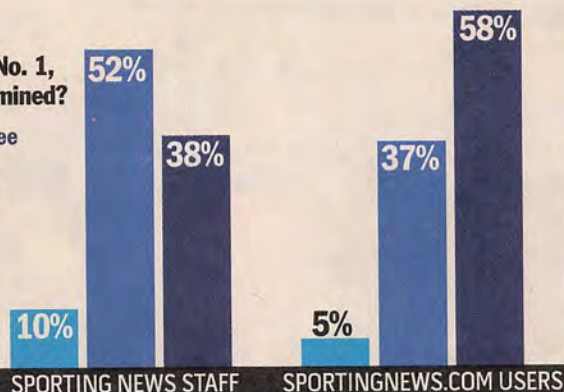
POLLING PLACE

Georgia starts the college football season at No. 1, but how should the final No. 1 team be determined?

I like the way the BCS system works with the bowls

I like the bowls enough that a four-team playoff would do

I’d like to see a 16-team postseason playoff



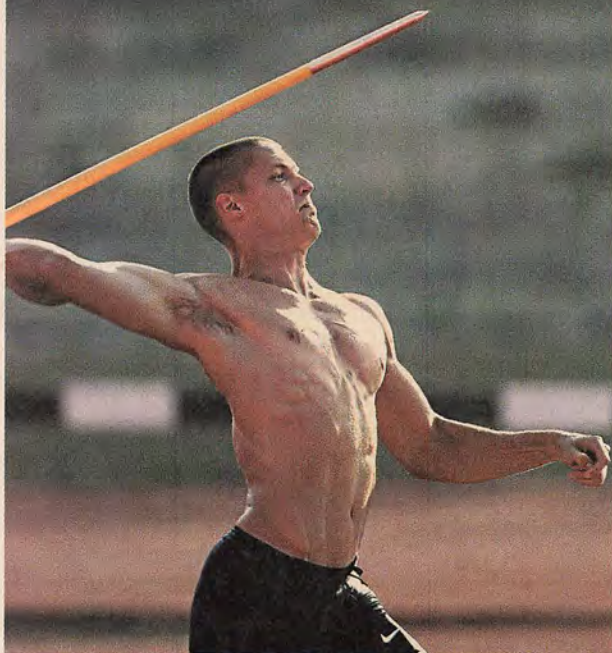
RADIO★STAR

Real talk from a fan on Sporting News Radio

“Manny Ramirez is a perfect fit for Los Angeles. He’s a celebrity in a town that loves celebrities. “Manny being Manny” will soon be the most popular phrase in all of Southern California.” —Wes in Phoenix, on The Matt Spiegel Show

The week ahead in sports

PICK *of the* WEEK

**THU 21**

Summer Olympics (8 p.m., NBC). It's Day 1 of that most classic of events—the decathlon—from National Stadium in Beijing, where over two days the world's most well-rounded athletes will sprint, hurdle, long jump, pole vault, throw the javelin and try to get Ted Thompson to admit they're better than Aaron Rodgers.

SAT 16 Cubs at Marlins

(7 p.m., WGN). Even Steve Bartman would agree: The Cubs are on their way. Unless some ill-begotten fan reaches out and touches the hopes and dreams of millions into a state of oblivion. But why, in a century of Saturdays, would something as crazy as that happen?

SUN 17 Under Armour All-

America Game (1:20 p.m., ESPN). Here's who you *need* to know among baseball's high school super ... wait. We've had a change of heart. Tell you what, we'll share this list *after* these kids pass their drug tests.

MON 18 Browns at Giants

(8 p.m., ESPN). He stands tall in the pocket, shows no fear and delivers the ball hard and true. His name, of course, is Derek Anderson. That Eli fella isn't altogether horrible, either.

FRI 22 Texans at Cowboys

(8 p.m., CBS). Boy, Tony Romo and Terrell Owens sure are ... hang on, why are we talking about those two stiff? Matt Schaub and Andre Johnson are *so* much herer-and-nower. —*Steve Greenberg*

BOB HILLE'S STARTING

5

1 Brett Favre. The Packers end up getting a conditional draft pick, and we end up getting our *SportsCenter* back.

2 The Olympics. I'm watching so much that I'm getting sleep-deprived, and it's not pretty. The other morning, I thought I saw Al Roker in rhythmic gymnastics.

3 **The Yankees.** Fighting through all the injuries, they're the definition of gritty, hard-nosed, blue-collar determination—if that definition includes a \$390,000 minimum salary and a \$75 per diem on the road.

4 The preseason top 25. My school's team received zero support in the early voting. It's the Fred Thompson of college football.

5 Pineapple Express. The plot: A pothead and his dealer go on the run from police after witnessing a shooting. The movie gets its title from ... well, because *The 2007 NBA All-Star Game* seemed a tad outdated.

WRECKED

LIFE IN THE CRASH LANE

THURSDAYS 10PM ET/7PM PT

SPEEDTV.COM

Adding to the legend of Babe Ruth

A New York dentist's research turns up some interesting and enlightening details about the Bambino's final days: He was an early cancer research volunteer

The story of Babe Ruth's bittersweet farewell at Yankee Stadium has been part of sports lore for generations. Shockingly stooped and frail, the slugger came to the Bronx ballpark on June 13, 1948, to put on the pinstriped uniform a last time and hear the roar of the faithful once more.

He died only two months later, on August 16, at age 53, by most accounts of throat cancer, brought on at least in part by a well-chronicled fondness for tobacco and liquor. But that's all wrong, says a Westchester County, N.Y., dentist with a passion for baseball history. And he's trying to set the record straight.

Dr. William Maloney spent a year researching the circumstances of Ruth's death, and the information he revealed in July's *Journal of the American Dental Association* about the Bambino's last days came as a surprise even to Ruth's closest living relative.

"I was stunned," says granddaughter Linda Ruth Tosetti. "It was the first I was reading that my grandfather did not have throat cancer. My mother, Dorothy, always thought it was throat cancer. So did the whole country."

Maloney uncovered little-known information about the experimental treatment that the doomed baseball titan agreed to take part in, the kindness Ruth showed toward medical

staff during his difficult final days and the rare form of cancer he actually died from, nasopharyngeal carcinoma (it causes less than 1 percent of the cancer deaths in the U.S. today).

"I used to see him as a giant on the field," says Maloney, a longtime Yankees fan whose office resembles a sports bar with a dentist's chair in the middle. "Now I see him as a giant off the field."

As an assistant professor at the NYU College of Dentistry, Maloney, who co-wrote the article with an NYU colleague, was intrigued by Ruth's death after a visit to the Babe Ruth Museum in Baltimore. And although the exact cause of Ruth's death had been noted in the scientific community—it was the subject of an article by a group of San Francisco doctors who turned up his autopsy results in 1998—biographies about Ruth all but missed it.

"They completely skip over his illness, and they got it all wrong," Maloney says. "They all said he had throat cancer—an easy conclusion because he was well-known for drinking, smoking and using tobacco. In fact, he died of a very rare cancer. And what I found out was that this larger-than-life celebrity was a pioneer in early cancer research."

Ruth agreed to take part in an experimental drug trial, one that had never been tried on



The lasting image of Ruth continues to change—even 60 years after his death.

humans. A number of doctors warned against it in an age when medical experimentation was far less regulated.

Tosetti was pleased to learn from Maloney that the kind of cancer her grandfather died from isn't often related to tobacco and alcohol. Ruth's willingness to take part in a risky experimental treatment—in effect to be a human guinea pig—without any promise of success also came as welcome news.

"I want people to know that he was a humanitarian as well as the greatest slugger in baseball history," she says. "He gave to the very end." —Robert Marchant

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THURSDAYS 9:00PM ET/10:00PM PT

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The coulda-shoulda Olympians

When he got the job in 2005, one of the principles new director Jerry Colangelo installed in the process of picking players for USA Basketball was an emphasis on character. More important, he implemented a three-year commitment requirement that would guarantee the program a certain level of continuity. Now, three years later, these Olympics will determine the success of Colangelo's revamped program—the players have more familiarity with one another and the international game, and in every tournament in which they've competed, they've been good citizens.

Still, it's hard not to take a moment and consider the players who are not in Beijing, the ones who—for differing reasons—are not wearing the red, white and blue. As good a collection of talent as the United States has in China, there are four guys who would sure look good in American uniforms now that the real competition has begun.

■ **Kevin Garnett.** When Team USA came asking for a three-year commitment, Garnett shrugged and said, "Nope." And that was that. USA Basketball didn't twist Garnett's arm, and Garnett continued to show no interest in joining the Olympic party. But K.G. averaged 10.8 points and 9.1 rebounds and tied for the team lead in steals (nine) at the 2000 Olympics in Sydney. He can rebound, he can pass, he can defend. He'd be a perfect fit for Team USA.

■ **Amare Stoudemire.** Did Stoudemire not want to play for the national team because his surgically repaired knee still was in need of rest and rehab, or was he simply not wanted? Depends on whom you ask, of course. The book on Stoudemire was that he preferred to have the ball in his hands and would be too much of a chemistry risk. But the reality is, with an undersized front line and Stoudemire's size, athleticism and ability to step out and shoot from midrange, Team USA could've used the guy.

■ **Tim Duncan.** Perhaps the most memorable image of the 2004 Olympics was of Duncan staring in disbelief at FIBA referees, something he did after every whistle blown against him. To be sure, the refs noticed Duncan showing them up and were not shy about repeatedly making calls against him, which drew more stares and, thus, more



Kobe Bryant fit in the new-and-improved USA Basketball program, but there were plenty of NBA stars who didn't.

whistles. In the bronze medal game, after his second foul, Duncan stood with his back to the lane while the Lithuanian player he had fouled shot free throws. After the game, Duncan declared himself "95 percent sure" that he would not play in international competitions again. That's too bad, because Duncan's '04 experience could've been useful on this team. Presumably, few U.S. players are more qualified to speak on the fickleness of FIBA officiating than Duncan, and he undoubtedly would've done a better job handling foul calls this time around.

■ **Lamar Odom.** One guy who was unfairly lumped in with the '04 disaster in Athens is Odom. He was one of the few Americans who played well throughout the tournament, providing great defense at multiple positions. Injuries and personal issues, though, kept Odom from participating in training and tournaments the past two years and all but knocked him out of Team USA's plans. Pity. He has an understanding of the international game and is versatile enough to have been a real weapon.

—Sean Deveney

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Upon further review ... Clippers center Chris Kaman was born in Michigan. The information was incorrect in the August 4 issue. ■ After Pocono, Kasey Kahne and David Ragan were separated by 126 points in the standings. The information was incorrect in the August 11 issue.



PREPARE TO DEFEAT DRY SKIN.

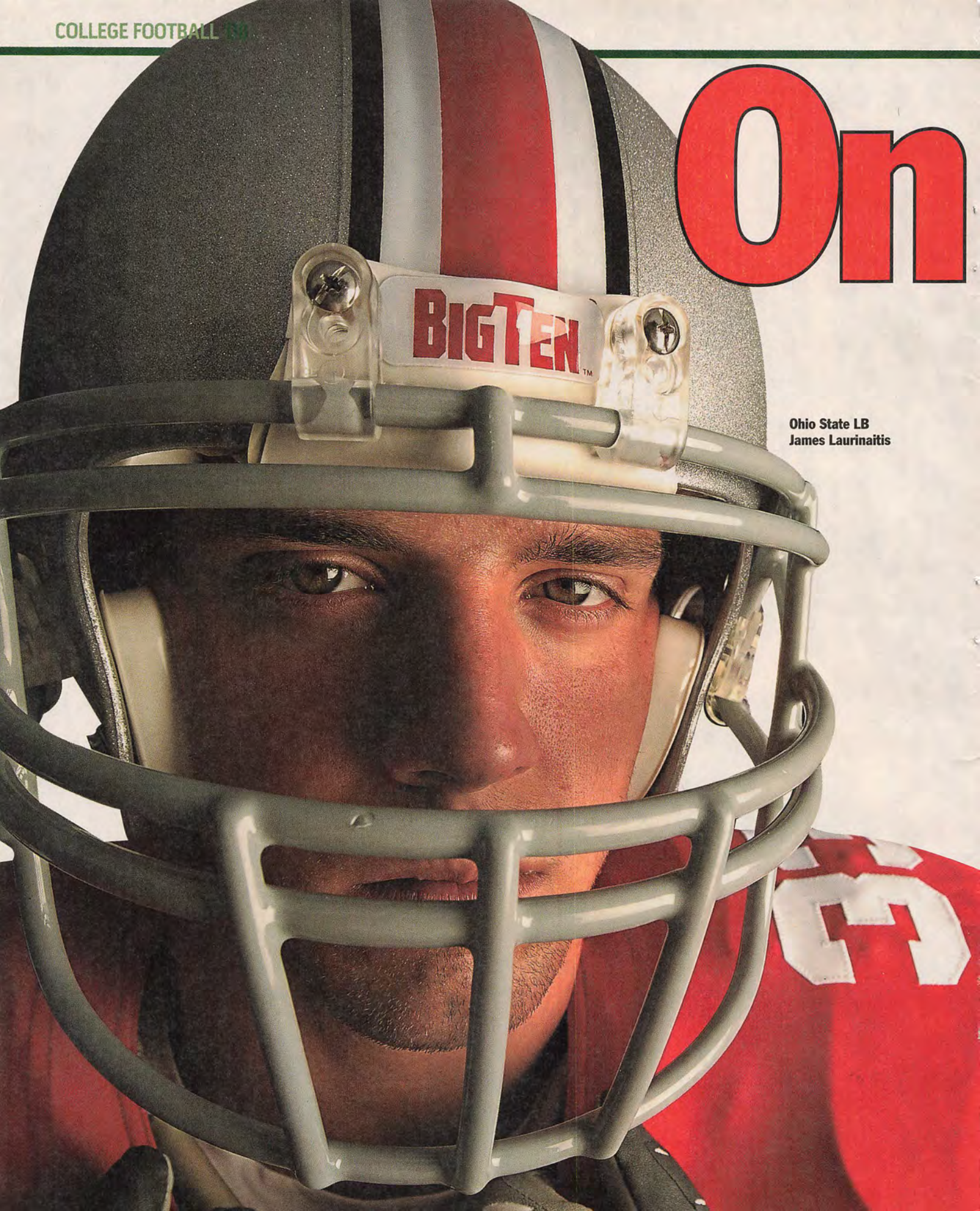
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UNLEASH THE POWER OF YOUR SHOWER.



On

Ohio State LB
James Laurinaitis



your marks



Oklahoma G
Duke Robinson

Last season was crazy out of the gate: After Appalachian State beat Michigan, 19 more top 10 teams lost to unranked teams. Seven No. 2 teams lost. The top two teams lost in the final week. So what can we expect this time around?

SN's top 25

1. Georgia
2. Ohio State
3. USC
4. Oklahoma
5. LSU
6. Missouri
7. Clemson
8. West Virginia
9. Florida
10. Illinois
11. Texas
12. Kansas
13. Virginia Tech
14. Wisconsin
15. Oregon
16. Auburn
17. Arizona State
18. Michigan
19. BYU
20. Texas Tech
21. South Florida
22. Tennessee
23. Alabama
24. Wake Forest
25. Fresno State



Southern Cal LB
Rey Mauluga

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5

reasons Georgia will win it all

This season, there's no better place to be than between the hedges

By Dave Curtis



DT Geno Atkins, Jr.

Few in the land can play defensive tackle like Atkins. Just don't expect him to tell you about it. "He's so quiet that you don't think he's focused or into this thing," says Willie Martinez, Georgia's defensive coordinator. "But you click on a film, or it's game day, and he's right there." His stats scream superstar: 41 tackles (14½ for loss), 37 hurries and 7½ sacks in 2007.

RB Knowshon Moreno, So.

The best tailback in the South, Moreno began his march to greatness with a 188-yard, three-touchdown effort in a victory over Florida last season. "He is the fuse to their offense," Kentucky defensive coordinator Steve Brown says. He might also be a Heisman Trophy candidate—we're betting Moreno has big games against Arizona State, LSU and the Gators during Georgia's championship run.

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QB Matthew Stafford, Jr.

Stafford (6-3, 237) arrived from Texas with an imposing figure and a heck of a fastball. Over the past two seasons, says an SEC coach, "he has learned how to pitch." Thanks to better touch on his throws and better decision making, Stafford went from seven touchdowns and 13 interceptions in 2006 to 19 and 10 last season. If those numbers improve further in 2008, watch out.

CB Asher Allen, Jr.

For 25 games, Allen had one interception on his resume. Then he picked off Hawaii's Colt Brennan twice in the Sugar Bowl, showing a flash of the playmaking ability he'll use to help the Georgia defense this season. A longtime threat as a return man, Allen will cover receivers from South Carolina's Kenny McKinley to Tennessee's Lucas Taylor. A few more interceptions against those guys will lift the Dawgs toward a national title.

LB Rennie Curran, So.

Curran was a bit player for the first two months of last season. "Then," defensive coordinator Willie Martinez says, "the coaching staff got smarter and started playing him." Curran started on the weak side in five of Georgia's final six games. He collected nine tackles for loss and three sacks and earned a handful of freshman All-American honors. This year, look out—he won't be scrambling to learn the defense.

Photo by
Bob Leverone / SN

The determination of a Bulldog

A tough schedule and an angry archrival bent on exacting revenge stand in the way, but No. 1 Georgia has the talent and experience to win the national title

By Matt Hayes

For the love of God, it was Vanderbilt. Vanderbilt. Yet there were the Bulldogs, jumping up and down like a bunch of lunatics, taunting and trashing the poor saps from Vanderbilt.

Vanderbilt.

"There were so many things wrong with that night," says Georgia coach Mark Richt. "More than anything, it was embarrassing."

And eye-opening. This is what it had come to last fall at Georgia: After years of building a program in his stoic, steady image, after years of winning championships and doing it all with respect and integrity, Richt found himself grabbing players by their jerseys and yanking them away from the scrum as they jumped up and down on the midfield logo at Vanderbilt Stadium after a last-second victory over a double-digit underdog.

Moreno, a preseason Heisman candidate, and the Bulldogs are flying high in 2008, but there are plenty of hurdles to clear between now and the BCS championship on January 8, 2009.

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Since when did Georgia, a heavyweight in the big, bad SEC, thump its chest after beating the league's tomato can with a late field goal? Since when did Georgia, which begins every year with the goal of winning it all, settle for the mediocrity of the moment?

It's like Tom Brady in a Bentley taunting you in your minivan.

"Looking back at it," says Georgia quarterback Matthew Stafford, "it probably wasn't the right thing to do."

Looking back, it changed Georgia's season—it jump-started a talented but wayward team that quickly righted wrongs, won a BCS bowl and now finds itself as the team to beat going into this season. No team is as balanced as Georgia; no team can match its combination of skill players on offense and speed and experience on defense.

After finishing last year as the nation's No. 2 team, the Dawgs start this fall as a consensus No. 1. And they can thank Vanderbilt.

For months we've heard of Georgia's cathartic victory last year over Florida, about how the Bulldogs finally found themselves in the big rivalry and ... blah, blah, blah. That game would mean nothing without the two games that set it up, the two doses of humility that flipped a switch on a suddenly stale team.

It all began on a steamy night in Knoxville, when wounded Tennessee thumped Georgia for the third time in four years. A year before, Georgia had been 5-0 before a blowout loss to the Vols



5 others who could win it

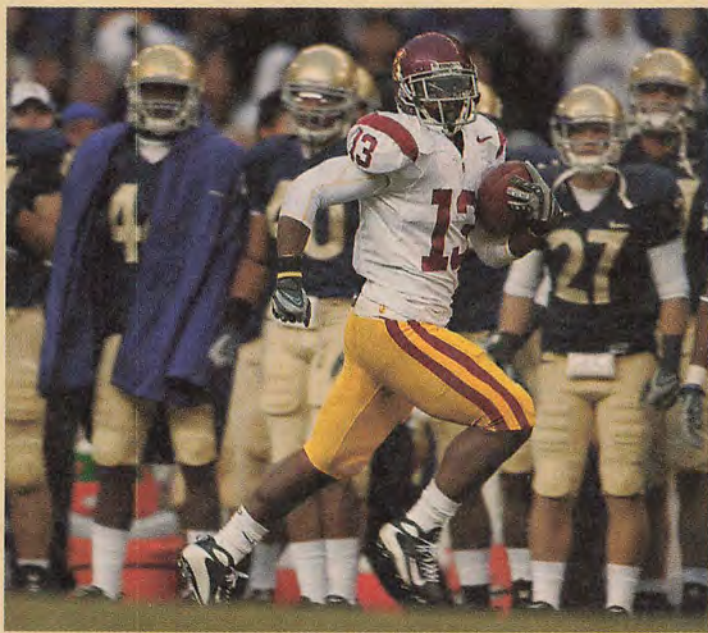
1. USC Trojans

Why we like 'em: The most talent in the nation. The best coach in the nation. A fast, experienced defense. What's not to like? When

your problem is which talented star to play—Patrick Turner or David Ausberry, Joe McKnight or Stafon Johnson, Mark Sanchez or Mitch Mustain?—you're at the top of any national title discussion. Now, the scary part: Coach Pete Carroll thinks this could be his best defense yet—and last year's group finished No. 2 in the nation. The defense likely has five first-round picks, including linebackers Rey Maualuga and Brian Cushing.

Turning point: In a huge nonconference game September 13 against Ohio State, the USC wide receivers, inconsistent much of last season, can set the tone—good or bad—for the remainder of the season. Why? Not many teams have a better cornerback combination than OSU's Malcolm Jenkins (a *Sporting News* preseason All-American) and Donald Washington. They're big and physical, and how this group of USC receivers performs in individual matchups at the line—getting off the jam and getting open—will show whether it can be special and, more than anything, dependable.

Fatal flaw: There's an unmistakable cloud hanging over USC the past two seasons: The Trojans have lost games they shouldn't have (Oregon State and UCLA in 2006, Stanford in 2007). No one plays better in big games, but USC has become susceptible in bridge games (read: nondescript games setting up bigger games). —Matt Hayes



Johnson is just one of the many stars aligned in USC's so-deep two-deep.

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How to describe a Dawgs D with nine starters back, including Dannell Ellerbe? Junkyard.

began an ugly 4-4 finish to the season and some internal strife about the direction of the program.

Nine wins at most programs is cause to celebrate. Nine wins at Georgia translates to reflection and recommitment. The four-loss 2006 season—and a loss to West Virginia in the Sugar Bowl a year earlier—had one of the nation's most consistent programs reeling. Richt gave play-calling duties to offensive coordinator Mike Bobo and focused more on managing the team.

So last year when the Bulldogs lost at home to South Carolina in Week 2, when Tennessee punked Georgia again, when Richt saw his players dancing—*dancing!*—after a win over Vanderbilt, the time had come for some serious evaluation. The team that had tanked the previous season was on the verge of doing it again.

"Mark is one of those—what do you call them?—self-realization guys," says Florida State coach Bobby Bowden, Richt's mentor and a friend Richt still calls during the season for advice.

"Some coaches get so wrapped up in what they're doing, in doing things their way and not changing, it becomes counterproductive. Part of Mark, I think, was concerned, *Could that be happening to me?*"

It is here that we introduce Florida week—or as Stafford says, "the week everything changed." The week Georgia became a complete team because Richt went against everything he believed from the day he started coaching as a graduate assistant at Florida State in the mid-1980s.

Good emotion can fuel a team; bad emotion (see: Vanderbilt) can wreck it. So during the open week before the World's Largest Outdoor Cocktail Party—with Georgia's psyche still bruised from the loss to Tennessee, the ugly win at Vanderbilt and the reality that the Bulldogs had lost 15 of the past 17 games to the hated Gators—Richt came up with an idea. A contrived, hokey idea to manufacture passion and keep his team emotionally charged for the biggest game of the season.

After Georgia's first score against Florida, all 11 players on the field were to celebrate and earn a 15-yard unsportsmanlike conduct penalty—or everyone on the team would be running wind sprints at 6 a.m. Sunday morning in Athens. Seemed easy enough.

"Only somebody in the crowd thought I meant *everybody*. And everybody went," Richt says of the Georgia players who flooded onto the field from the sideline. "But when I saw that exuberance, when I saw that energy, when I saw the passion and the fire get unleashed that had been dormant in this football team, I got excited. I got fired up."

A couple of hours later, Georgia's shocking 42-30 win featured the most points the Bulldogs had scored in the series since a guy named Herschel ran over the Gators 25 years earlier. A couple of months later—after the Dawgs had reeled off five more wins, including an emasculation of Hawaii in the Sugar Bowl—Georgia president Michael Adams publicly demanded a national playoff because—why else?—Georgia got screwed by the confounding BCS.

So now here we are: The Dawgs are everyone's preseason No. 1, with a quarterback (Stafford) who could develop into the No. 1 pick in the NFL draft, a tailback (Knowshon Moreno) who's a preseason Heisman Trophy favorite and a stout defense that brings back memories of the Junkyard Dawgs from decades ago.

Last year's team won 11 games with a young offensive line and a quarterback still embracing the subtleties of when to play smart and when to



Though only part of a loaded roster, Wells puts the oomph in the OSU ground game.

5 others who could win it 2. Ohio State Buckeyes

Why we like 'em: We know, we know. Ohio State has been exposed in the only game that matters not once but twice. The loss to Florida two years ago was horrific; the loss to LSU last year wasn't nearly as bad as it looked—three blown plays turned that game into a rout. But the Buckeyes return a boatload of starters from that team and will get instant upgrades on defense from ends Lawrence Wilson and Cameron Heyward. By the end of the season, OSU could have the nation's best player on offense (tailback Chris Wells) and defense (linebacker James Laurinaitis).

Turning point: Ohio State has two practice games—eight quarters against Division I-AA Youngstown State and Ohio—to get dynamic freshman quarterback Terrelle Pryor ready to play. Why is this important, you ask? Because Todd Boeckman, although steady and efficient, is a statue in the pocket. The more multiple the Buckeyes become on offense, the more dangerous they become in three brutal road games (USC, Wisconsin, Illinois). Pryor gives the offense the zone read option play and allows play-caller/coach Jim Tressel to get creative.

Fatal flaw: It's inevitable that the Buckeyes will be judged—fair or not—on one game this season. Just so happens that one game is at USC on September 13. And OSU has struggled to win the big ones. Win this one and the Buckeyes instantly surge to the head of the pack headed to south Florida for the BCS national title game. Lose and a whole lot of funky (see: 2007 season) has to happen to get Ohio State to the big game for the third straight year. —Matt Hayes

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Daniel sized up Mizzou's heart and changed the way the Tigers play the game.

5 others who could win it

3. Missouri Tigers

Why we like 'em:

Offense, offense, offense. (Have you seen the defenses in the Big 12?) Who cares if Chase Daniel isn't your typical, physical freak of a quarterback; dude has game. He's tough and accurate—and the once-underachieving Tigers have taken to his suck-it-up-and-play personality and found an identity. Then there's Jeremy Maclin. For those outside the Midwest still learning, one word: *TiVo*.

Turning point: They've heard enough about the schedule thing. That cakewalk last year got the Tigers into the Big 12 championship game. Guess what? It's easier this fall, with Oklahoma and Texas essentially swapping places as the heavyweight. That—no disrespect to the Longhorns—is a trade anyone in the Big 12 will take. So it's the season ender against Kansas that will be the difference between playing Oklahoma in the Big 12 championship with a spot in the national title game on the line or playing in a non-BCS game (*deja vu*, anyone?). We may rank Oklahoma higher, but the schedule gives the Tigers better odds than the Sooners of putting together an unbeaten regular season. From there, Mizzou has a puncher's chance to make it to the national title game.

Fatal flaw: Mizzou made the jump to the nation's elite last fall because it finally understood and embraced team defense. The Tigers went from being a unit that lost games to one that kept things close until Daniel and the offense could take over. But Missouri gave up yards (378.9 per game) and points (23.3 per game) at a less than elite rate, let alone a less than championship rate.

—Matt Hayes

take chances. As Stafford grew up, the offense became more balanced and kept teams from focusing on Moreno. By the time Georgia was resting everyone remotely close to the starting lineup in the fourth quarter of the 41-10 rout of Hawaii, expectations for this fall had begun to soar.

It's a simple formula, really: Seventeen starters return—nine from a top 15 defense—for what will be the best team in the nation's best conference. And if the BCS controversy of the past two seasons means anything, it's good to be the lead Dawg in the SEC.

Florida edged out Michigan to gain access to the BCS national title game in 2006 and then won it all. A year later, LSU nudged out every two-loss team on the planet to earn a spot in the national championship game and, of course, has the Waterford crystal to prove it.

"If you can navigate this league," LSU coach Les Miles says, "you've got a pretty good chance to be playing in that big game at the end of the season."

What a quick ascent it has been for Georgia: from a team teetering on East Division irrelevance in the SEC to a team expected to make it to the national title game. Doesn't matter that Georgia likely has the toughest schedule in the nation. Or that the Dawgs will travel west of the Mississippi for a nonconference regular-season game (Arizona State) for the first time since 1967.

Or that since January, Georgia has had eight players arrested (six suspended) in what has become an embarrassing side story during what should be a glorious time. Forget that only one starter has been suspended (guard Clint Boling for one game)—the underlying theme is one of uncertainty at the worst possible moment.

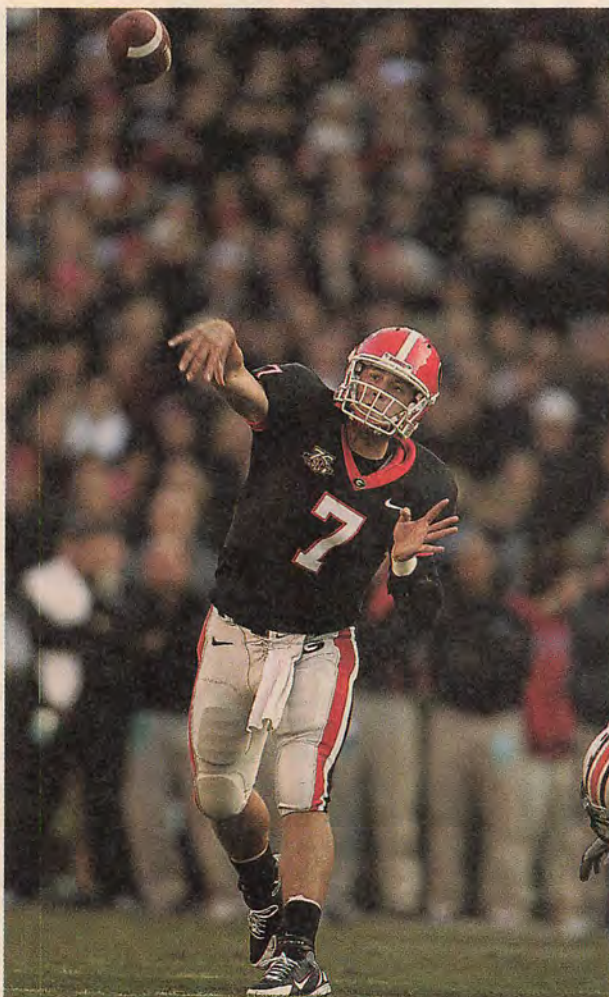
Sound familiar? Only this time, SEC punching bag Vandy isn't around to cure the ills.

"The reputation of this team has been damaged, no question," Richt says. "There's no

Stafford has grown into a leader on offense, not to mention a top NFL prospect.



Davis splits the tailback load with C.J. Spiller, a seasonal time share unique to Clemson, S.C.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: ALBERT DICKSON / SN; BOB LEVERONE / SN (2)

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5 others who could win it

4. Clemson Tigers

Why we like 'em: Any coach at any level with any ounce of Woody Hayes in him will tell you the key to a championship season is running the ball and stopping

the run. Ladies and gentlemen, meet the epitome of that age-old axiom: the Clemson Tigers. Tailbacks James Davis and C.J. Spiller would start for nine out of 10 Division I teams, and the defense—with the best front four in the ACC—was 23rd in the nation last year against the run. The Tigers also have a fifth-year senior quarterback (Cullen Harper) who just happens to be a legitimate Heisman Trophy candidate.

Turning point: Right out of the box. As much as coach Tommy Bowden wants to downplay the significance of a nonconference game, you'd better believe the Week 1 Alabama game—for so many reasons—is make-or-break. Clemson is a program with a shaky psyche that needs something good to happen early. A win over an SEC team would earn the Tigers instant respect and build confidence despite a history of struggling early or fading late in nearly every season under Bowden. And, frankly, other than an October visit to Wake Forest, there is no tougher game on the schedule.

Fatal flaw: Does Clemson have the gumption to play at an elite level with everything on the line? The ACC is down, Clemson has never been more talented under Bowden, and the Tigers could sneak into the BCS national title game with a magical season. There's a reason Clemson has earned the tag of underachiever. Does it end this fall? —Matt Hayes



This BYU team is built on defense, yet the Cougars' offense leaves opponents muttering a four-letter word: Unga.

5 others who could win it

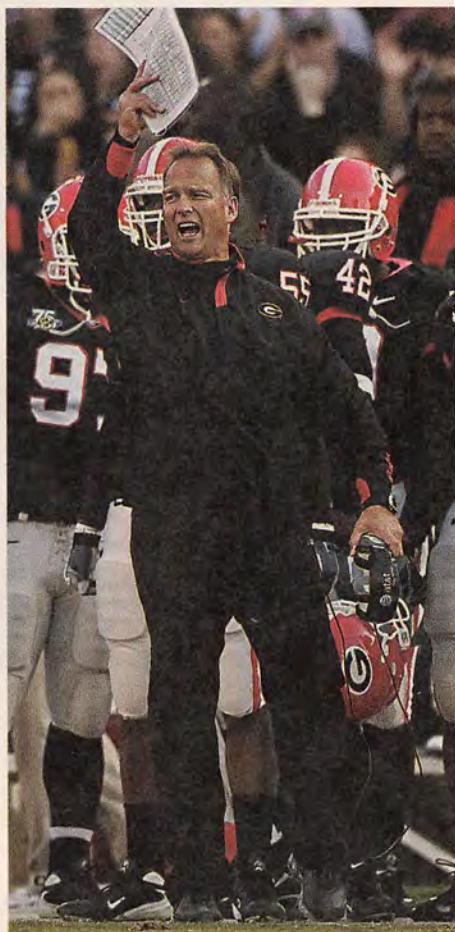
Why we like 'em: Remember in 2001, when BYU was unbeaten in late November

and barking about the BCS and ... gave up 72 points to Hawaii? Not this time. This team is built on defense, and even though the Cougars are thin on experience, no team in the nation is more a reflection of its coach than BYU is of tough guy Bronco Mendenhall. The Cougars have won 22 games over the past two seasons—really, they have—and they know how to play in big games.

Turning point: It's pretty simple: They have to beat Washington and UCLA in September, and things will get interesting in November. The Huskies and Bruins aren't among the elite in the Pac-10, but both will pose problems for the Cougars because of their athletic ability. BYU is 3-1 against the Pac-10 the past two seasons and has had success because it has been able to dictate tempo. Meet tempo: Harvey Unga, 245 pounds of bruising, battering tailback.

Fatal flaw: The Mountain West is a stroll, right? BYU has won 16 in a row in the league (longest current winning streak in any conference) and 21 of 22. But conference games have much greater significance—and teams tend to play tight (see: TCU, 2000; Fresno State, 2001) when a BCS bowl (or more) is on the line. BYU's final two weeks of the season: road trips to Air Force and Utah.

—Matt Hayes



Last year's success melted into an offseason of off-field distractions for Richt and his team.

way you can say it hasn't been a distraction."

A distraction, yes. A deterrent? Hardly. No Georgia team has begun a season ranked No. 1 in any poll. No Georgia team in decades has had this much talent—from linebacker Dannell Ellerbe to shut-down cornerback Asher Allen to backup tailback Caleb King, a freshman bruiser who played so well in the spring that Richt says he will find a way to get Moreno and King in the backfield at the same time.

This team proved a year ago it can make everything all right at the moment it seems so wrong.

"Things happen for a reason," says senior defensive tackle Jeff Owens. "Go back to last year, and we shouldn't have been dancing on Vanderbilt's 'V.' Shoot, we probably shouldn't have been dancing against Florida. But what's done is done."

But it most certainly isn't. There's one game that sticks out on Georgia's brutal schedule, a schedule that includes road games against Arizona State, South Carolina, LSU and Auburn. Maybe it's best if Florida coach Urban Meyer—whose Gators are among a handful of teams who

will challenge for the national title—explains.

"It was uncalled for," Meyer said this summer of Georgia's end zone celebration.

In his autobiography *Urban's Way*, due out in September, he explains in detail: "It was a bad deal. It will forever be in the mind of Urban Meyer and our football team. We'll handle it, and it's going to be a big deal."

Or, as Florida offensive tackle Phil Trautwein says, "What goes around comes around."

What's done is done, all right.

What's yet to come is even better.

SN

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Instant expert

THE POWER STRUCTURE

1. SEC. The Dawg days are upon us, people. Or maybe it's the Gator days. Or is it still the Bayou Bengal days?

2. Big 12. Top to bottom (well, maybe not *bottom*), this is the most improved league in the land. For the second year in a row, to boot.

3. Big Ten. Ohio State is so bad (how bad is it?) we'll almost be halfway surprised when the Buckeyes play for the BCS title yet again.

4. Pac-10. Most of last season's upper-half finishers (Arizona State, Oregon State, Oregon, UCLA) are in danger of slipping. You'll notice we didn't mention USC.

5. Big East. It's hard to know what to make of any of these teams, even West Virginia. We don't even know Louisville anymore.

6. ACC. Clemson sure looks good—words that typically are spoken before an all-out Tigers collapse. Maybe Florida State and Mia ... *nah*.

7. Mountain West. Somebody's got to be the best of the rest. BYU looks big league-tough; Utah and TCU will have their say.



Brian Johnson and his teammates hope to bring some Ute-ful exuberance to the BCS party.

OLD FACES, NEW PLACES



Rich Rodriguez, Michigan. Remind us, please—which verse of “The Victors” has that line about square pegs and round holes?

Rick Neuheisel, UCLA. Big talk so far from the Slickster. Will his boys back him up on December 6, or will the Trojans win by 40?

Bobby Petrino, Arkansas. Even without Darren McFadden, the Hogs’ offense will improve immediately. As for their general happiness ...

Bo Pelini, Nebraska. Just think, surrendering 75 points to Kansas and 64 to Colorado would be steps in the right direction.

Mike Sherman, Texas A&M. He must be good—didn’t he once help bring relatively swift resolution to a Brett Favre retirement saga?

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Give us just a few minutes and we'll have you in game shape for August 30

By Steve Greenberg

RISE AND SHINE

They'd better get up for these early schedules.

USC. Even for the Trojans, their start (at Virginia, vs. Ohio State, at Oregon State, vs. Oregon, vs. Arizona State) is an enormous hill to get over.

Washington. The Huskies open at Oregon then come home to keep playing underdog against BYU and (gulp) Oklahoma. Hang in there, Ty!

UCLA. Whoa—right out of the chute vs. Tennessee. Then it's off to BYU. How about some love for the Pac-10?

Miami. An opening-week gimme vs. Charleston Southern won't do much to prepare the Canes for games at Florida and Texas A&M. Oh, to somehow be 2-1.

Hawaii. Game 1: at Florida. Game 3: at Oregon State. Game 14: If there is one, it sure as heck won't have anything to do with the BCS.

East Carolina. Oh, nothing much going on in Weeks 1 and 2. Just back-to-back games against—are you ready for this?—Virginia Tech (in Charlotte) and West Virginia.

SNOOZE ALARM

We'll wake you when they're finally playing somebody.

LSU. What a gantlet—Appalachian State (oh, please), Troy and North Texas in Baton Rouge. Way to break a sweat, boys.

Texas Tech. The Red Raiders will be 4-0 after playing Eastern Washington, Nevada, SMU and UMass. And it won't mean a dang thing.

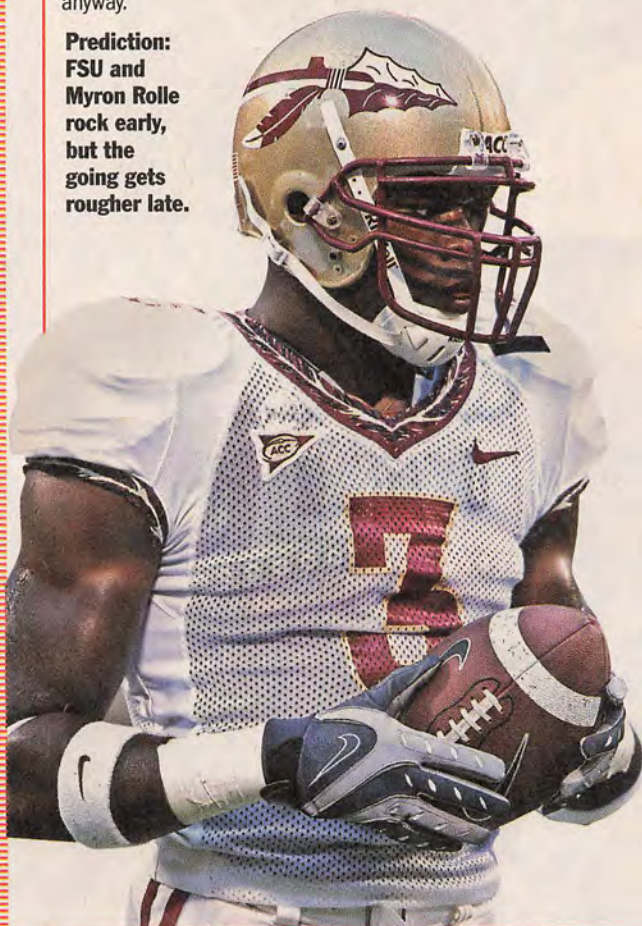
Florida State. Prediction: The 'Noles will look scary-good against Western Carolina and Chattanooga (yes, *that* Chattanooga). Sadly, scary-bad will be right around the corner.

Indiana. That deafening silence you'll hear will be the Hoosiers in Bloomington vs. Western Kentucky, Murray State and Ball State.

Missouri. After the big'un in St. Louis vs. Illinois, the Tigers go home and veg for three weeks: Southeast Missouri State, Nevada and Buffalo.

Nebraska. Bo Pelini wasn't hired to beat the likes of Western Michigan, San Jose State and New Mexico State, but he'll start 3-0 anyway.

Prediction:
FSU and
Myron Rolle
rock early,
but the
going gets
rougher late.



THE CAN'T-MISS LIST



Cedric Dockery and Texas aim to rival Oklahoma's ongoing revival.

1. Ohio State at USC, September 13. If this were the Rose Bowl, it would be one of the greatest ever.

2. Georgia vs. Florida, November 1. For a real change, it's the Gators who will be looking for payback in Jacksonville.

3. Oklahoma vs. Texas, October 11. The Sooners are all the way back, but maybe Dallas will be the sight of a Longhorns revival.

4. Georgia at LSU, October 25. This year's No. 1 vs. last year's No. 1—the difference being LSU's ranking actually counted for something.

5. Ohio State at Illinois, November 15. Michi-who? Here's your Big Ten title game.

6. Missouri vs. Kansas, November 29. Kansas City will be big enough for the both of them, but just barely.

7. Clemson vs. Alabama, August 30. One team will skyrocket out of Atlanta; the other will try not to completely fall apart.

8. Auburn at West Virginia, October 23. Bill Stewart gets to show the world what he's made of against a national title sleeper.

9. Georgia at Arizona State, September 20. Matthew Stafford vs. Rudy Carpenter in the desert. Enjoy the show.

10. USC at UCLA, December 6. No matter what the standings say, Pete Carroll and Rick Neuheisel are 0-0 vs. each other. Sideline shots galore!

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ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN (AND IT PROBABLY WILL)

An SEC East team loses to a Pac-10 team. But is it Georgia at Arizona State or Tennessee at UCLA?

Texas Tech's Graham Harrell becomes college football's all-time leader in touchdown passes. He needs only 43 for the record. What, is that a lot? He had 48 last season!

Houston Nutt gets Ole Miss going in the right direction. Unfortunately, putting the Rebels on a par with LSU and Auburn (and Arkansas?) would be another story altogether.

Mike Stoops saves his job. More like the Arizona Wildcats save their coach's job. Any bowl will do, baby.

Notre Dame climbs back over .500. Call us crazy, but we're seeing at least five wins on the Irish's home schedule alone.



ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN (BUT IT PROBABLY WON'T)

The Missouri-Illinois winner goes on to win its conference title. Maybe if the Oklahoma/Ohio State team bus blows a tire and necessitates a forfeit.

Miami and Florida State knock off the Gators. What's their next trick—sweeping the Jags, Bucs and Dolphins?

Michigan shocks everybody and wins 10 games. Oh, don't laugh so hard. It's not like the Wolverines are running a bunch of stiffos onto the field.

Tyrone Willingham saves his job. Unless the Huskies fail to win about eight games—roughly twice as many as we're picking them to.

Another two-loss SEC team makes it to the national championship game. Sure—if the rest of college football is a bunch of complete wusses.

Two losses in '07 didn't prevent LSU and Ricky Jean-Francois from hoisting the Waterford.

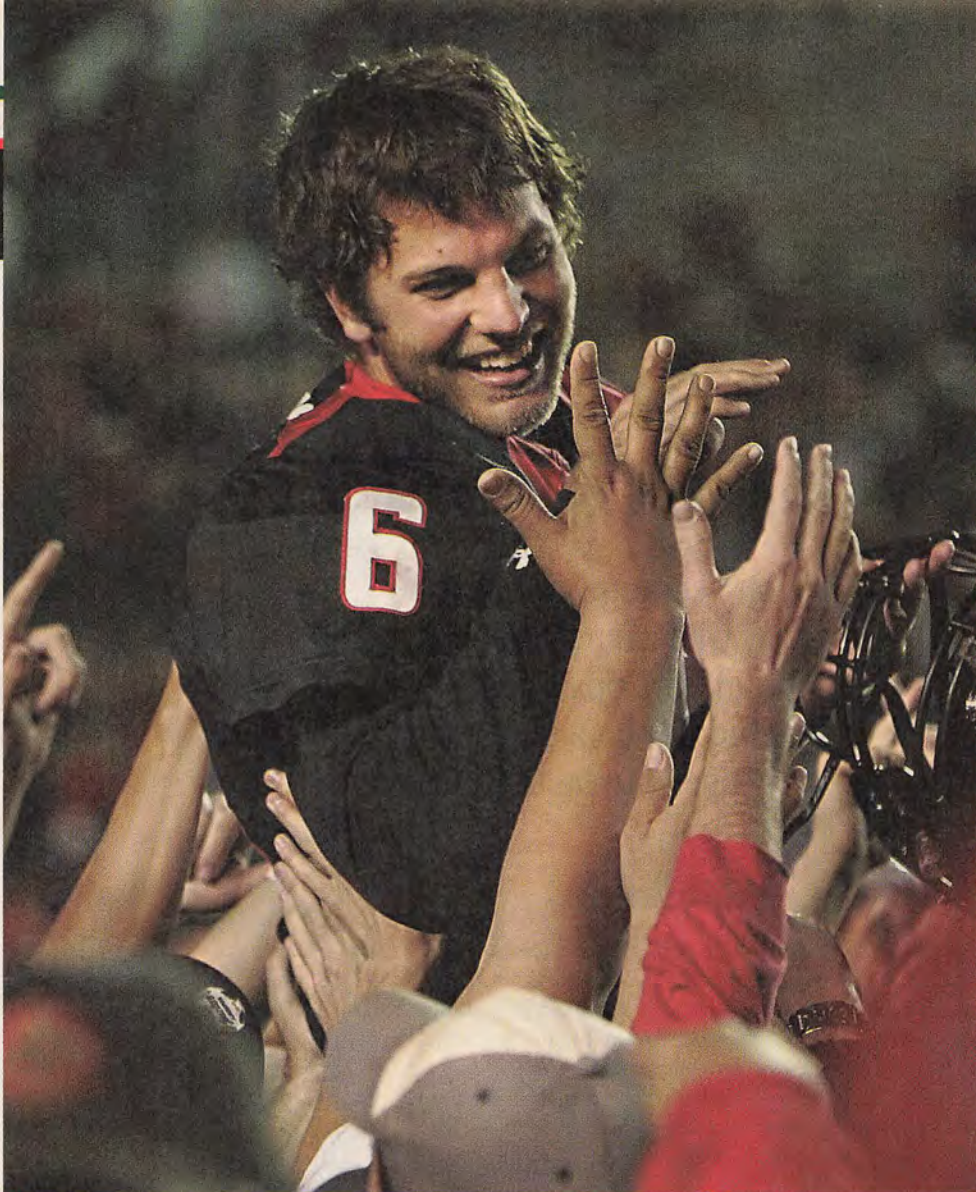


Arizona's Stoops would welcome a bowl bid, any bowl bid, with ... well, you know.

FROM TOP: ALBERT DICKSON / SH; MARK J. TERRILL / AP

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SN ALL-AMERICANS

Offense

QB	Tim Tebow, Jr., Florida
RB	Chris Wells, Jr., Ohio State
RB	Knowshon Moreno, So., Georgia
WR	Michael Crabtree, So., Texas Tech
WR	Percy Harvin, Jr., Florida
TE	Travis Beckum, Sr., Wisconsin
OL	Duke Robinson, Sr., Oklahoma
OL	Jonathan Luigs, Sr., Arkansas
OL	Alex Mack, Sr., California
OL	Michael Oher, Sr., Mississippi
OL	Andre Smith, Jr., Alabama

Defense

DL	Fili Moala, Sr., USC
DL	Greg Middleton, Jr., Indiana
DL	George Selvie, Jr., South Florida
DL	Maurice Evans, Jr., Penn State
LB	James Laurinaitis, Sr., Ohio State
LB	Rey Maualuga, Sr., USC
LB	Scott McKillop, Sr., Pitt
DB	Malcolm Jenkins, Sr., Ohio State
DB	William Moore, Sr., Missouri
DB	Patrick Chung, Sr., Oregon
DB	Vontae Davis, Jr., Illinois

Specialists

K	Thomas Weber, So., Arizona State
P	Kevin Huber, Sr., Cincinnati
KR	Jeremy Maclin, So., Missouri
PR	Joe McKnight, So., USC

OH, YEAH—THAT TROPHY

Tim Tebow, QB, Florida.

Seriously, what more can he do? He probably won't put up another 20-20 season, but if the Gators can find a consistent running game to keep Tebow from absorbing so many hits, watch him flourish as a thrower this fall.

Jeremy Maclin, WR, Missouri. There may be no duo that splits the vote more than Daniel and Maclin.

Chase Daniel, QB, Missouri.

The plucky Texan is all of 5-10, but he plays smart and teammates feed off his emotion and leadership. He's accurate and efficient and has the talent around him for another monster season.

Chris Wells, RB, Ohio State.

He's the nation's most productive tailback playing for a team in the thick of the BCS race at a Heisman Trophy-producing school. Yeah, a good combination.

Pat White, QB, West

Virginia. The only variable is his health. The Mountaineers will ride White—the college game's most dynamic player—all the way to a BCS bowl. That's a recipe for Heisman glory.

Graham Harrell, QB, Texas

Tech. Harrell will have 3,000 passing yards and 30-plus TDs before the heavy lifting in the Big 12 begins. What happens after that will determine whether he falls away like Tech quarterbacks in the past.

Sam Bradford, QB,

Oklahoma. He puts up huge numbers but must prove he can play well in big games away from Norman.

Knowshon Moreno, RB, Georgia. Two things going against him: He might not get the ball enough (freshman Caleb King is a terrific tailback), and quarterback Matthew Stafford might take away some of the votes. —Matt Hayes

The game-breakers

Every conference has the one guy who keeps defensive coordinators up at night. It takes more than just blazing speed to be that guy.

SEC: Percy Harvin, WR, Florida

They didn't talk much when they first arrived in Gainesville, a couple of hotshot recruits for the Florida Gators with different lives and different vibes.

Tim Tebow was the humble, home-schooled golden child from Jacksonville; Percy Harvin the glamorous No. 1 recruit in the nation from Virginia Beach, Va.

"You get to know someone," Harvin says, "and things change."

So there was Harvin last December, sitting in his living room with a couple of teammates, wiping tears of joy when Tebow won the Heisman Trophy. Soon after the ceremony, Tebow made the call that set in motion what could be a memorable junior season for Harvin.

"I just yelled into the phone," Tebow says. "I told him, 'You're next!'"

Don't be surprised if he is. No player in the nation is as dynamic and dominant as Harvin. No player is in a better position—with the overwhelming speed and talent on the Florida offense—to have a Heismanesque season. And no player could care less.

"All that hype doesn't mean anything," Harvin says. "That was my downfall in high school. I like being in the shadows now. I like being the guy you don't hear about."

That fit perfectly for this offseason of secrecy. Harvin played most of last season with an aching heel, one that eventually required surgery in April. He missed spring drills, and the Florida staff was extremely conservative when addressing his status for the fall.

But when camp began last week, Harvin was running full-speed with the first team—with an extra 13 pounds he had picked up in offseason conditioning. The sinewy 5-11 wideout of two years ago is now a chiseled 203 pounds with arms the size of an offensive lineman's—a guy who could handle 20 to 25 touches a game at a variety of positions. Harvin still will play the majority of his snaps at wideout but also will spend time at tailback and in the hybrid slotback position.

"I know there are some people who think I can't take that kind of pounding," he says. "All that is to me is an opportunity to prove them wrong."

And maybe pick up a Heisman along the way. —Matt Hayes

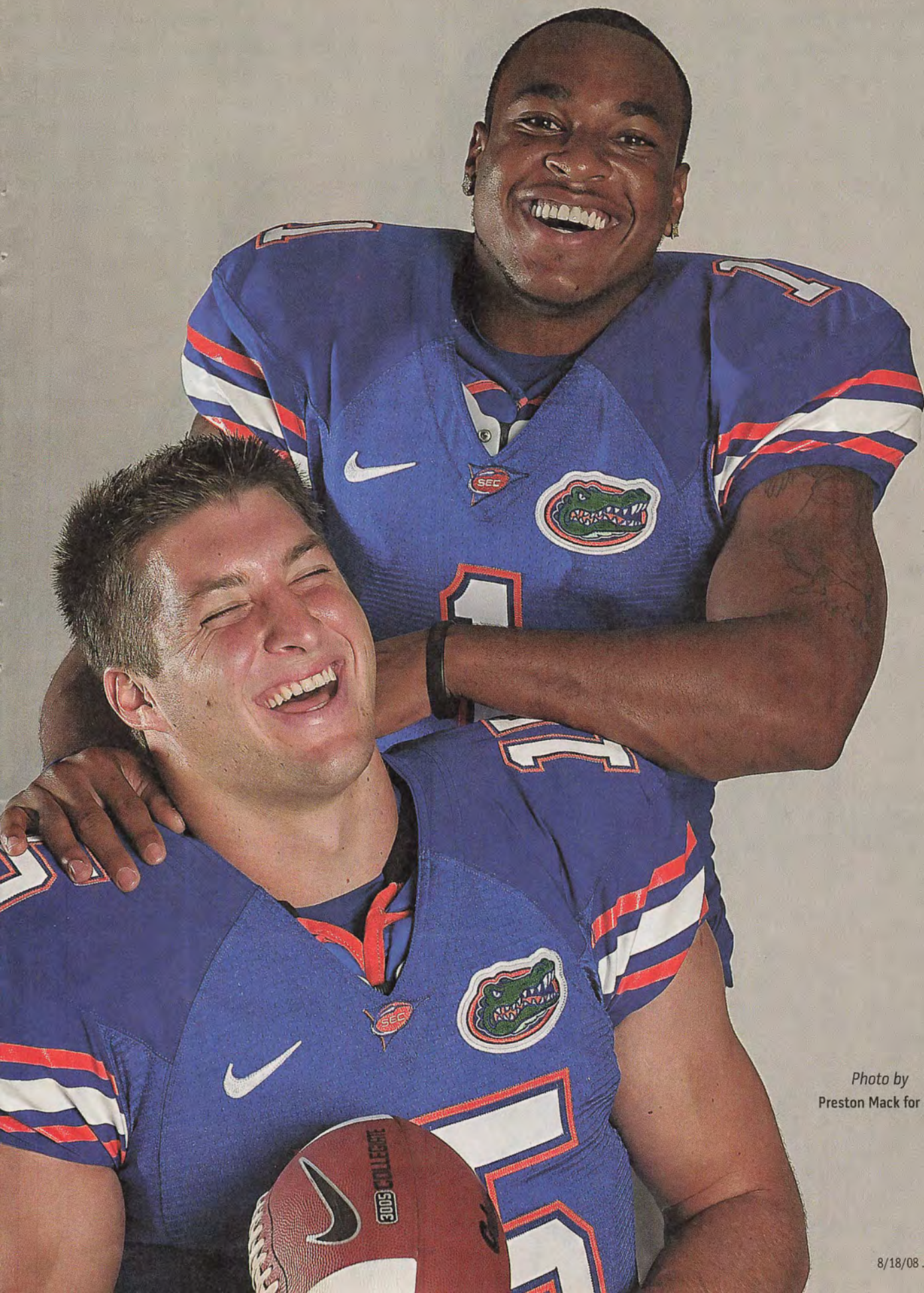
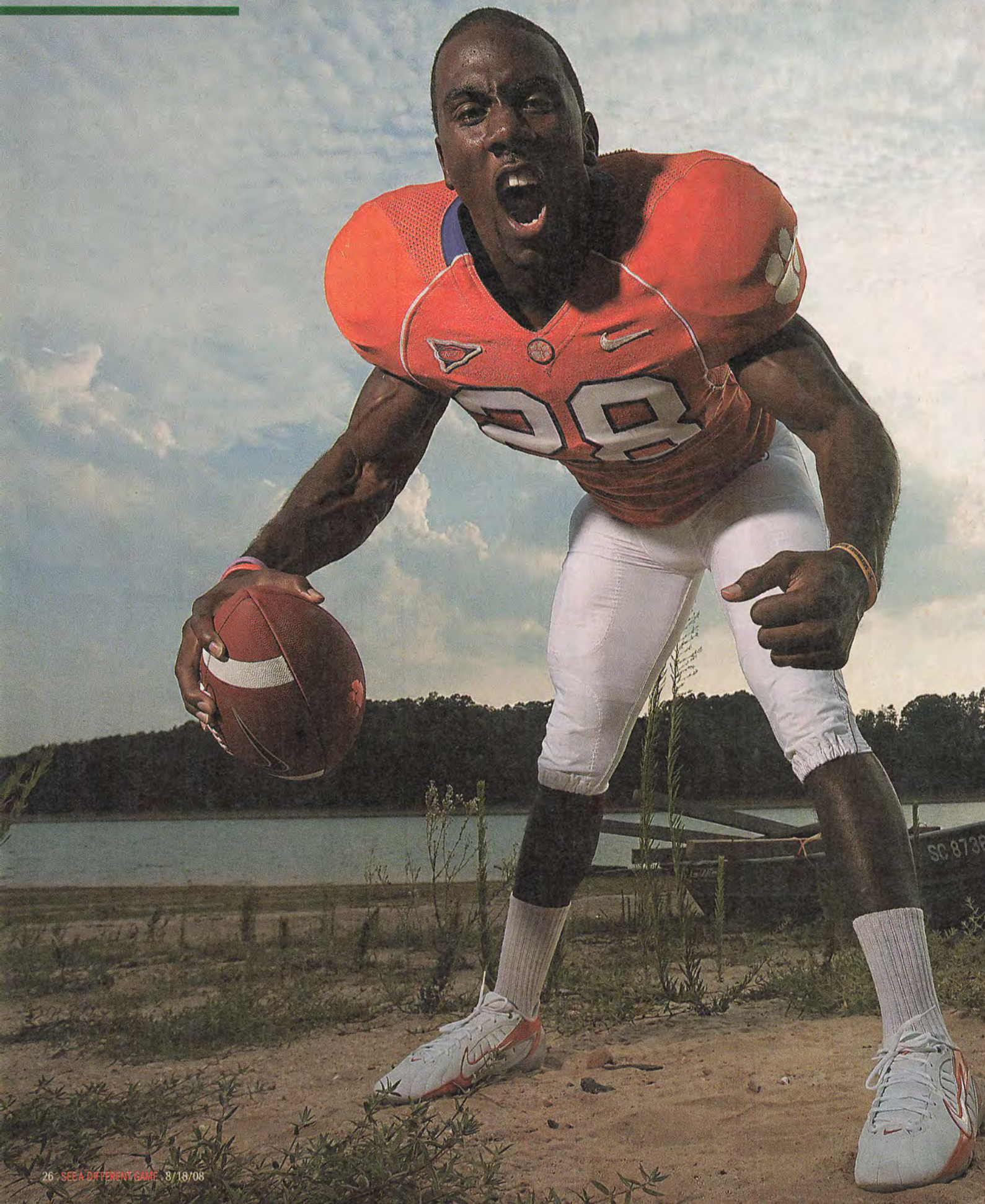


Photo by
Preston Mack for SN






Photo by
Bob Leverone / SN

ACC: C.J. Spiller, RB, Clemson

He was told the number and couldn't believe it. Had to be smaller, had to be wrong.

C.J. Spiller averaged 16.5 touches a game last year for Clemson. How in the world did it feel like half that?

"You have to ask the offensive coordinator that," Spiller says.

OK, what does Rob Spence, Clemson's innovative coordinator, think of one of the game's most dynamic players touching the ball 16 times a game—a measly 13 times not including punt and kick returns?

"He's one of a handful of guys who need the ball," Spence says. "And there's only one ball."

Well, only Spiller—one of the game's fastest players, who has been clocked in the low 4.3s in the 40—can score any time he touches the ball. Only Spiller can change a defensive game plan.

Only there's one teensy problem: James Davis, a grinder who moves the pile between the tackles, is the team's starting tailback. He had 69 more carries than Spiller last season.

Spiller (5-11, 190) doesn't move piles, he runs around and by them. In theory, anyway.

"He's a powerful guy, a punishing runner" says Georgia Tech defensive tackle Vance Walker. "Trust me, if he's looking to get outside, it's because he has a chance to score. He's not avoiding anything."

At this point, the inside-outside debate isn't a factor. Spence runs the offense with specific plays for Davis and Spiller, and those plays usually fall along typecast lines—Davis grinds for touch yards, Spiller gets isolation plays to free him up in space.

"How do you know I can't run between the tackles if you don't give it to me?" Spiller says. "It's my job to prove I can do it."

Maybe then those touch numbers won't be so surprising. Or maybe they will—depending on how you look at it. —Matt Hayes

BIG EAST: Pat White, QB, West Virginia

He's not looking past anything in his senior season, not glossing over any mundane practice or meeting or gimme game.

Couldn't blame him if he did.

Like it or not, one game stares back at Pat White this fall. The Auburn game—seven weeks into the season, on October 23—is the day it all unfolds: West Virginia's place among the nation's elite, White's run at the Heisman Trophy and, yes, his first and only chance at redemption.

"I can't lie," White says. "Of course I'm thinking about it."

How could he not? It was four years ago that Alabama and Auburn both rolled into Daphne, Ala., to see the skinny quarterback with the quick feet and eventually offered him scholarships.

To play wide receiver.

"You think he could play quarterback for us now?" Auburn coach Tommy Tuberville says sarcastically. "He's the best player in the country."

The best player who could be playing for the best team. Forget about the weak conference argument. The Mountaineers team that blasted Oklahoma, 48-28, in last season's Fiesta Bowl would've beaten any team, anywhere, anytime.

The question: Can WVU—and White—capture the momentum from that glorious night and ride it all the way to the BCS championship game in Miami? One huge obstacle will be the Auburn game—a Thursday night matchup on national television against a speedy defense.

"Not too many people are going to run away from us," says Auburn defensive tackle Sen'Derrick Marks.

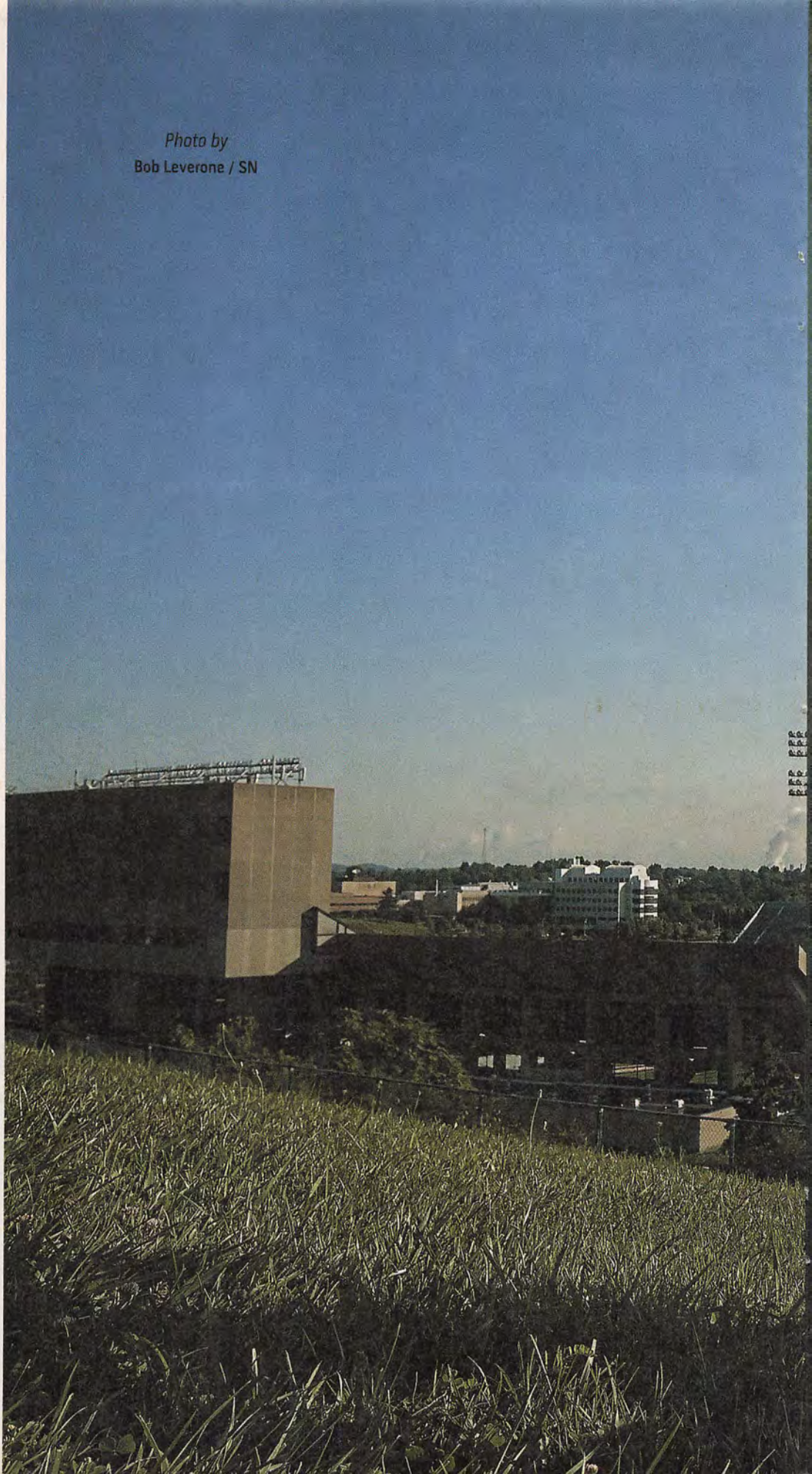
Not many teams have a quarterback like White, who after thriving for three years in the run-based spread option offense, will throw 18 to 25 times a game this fall.

"We were very basic last year," White says. "We looked at half the field and that was it. People who don't think we can throw it, just wait."

He has something to prove, all right.

—Matt Hayes

Photo by
Bob Leverone / SN



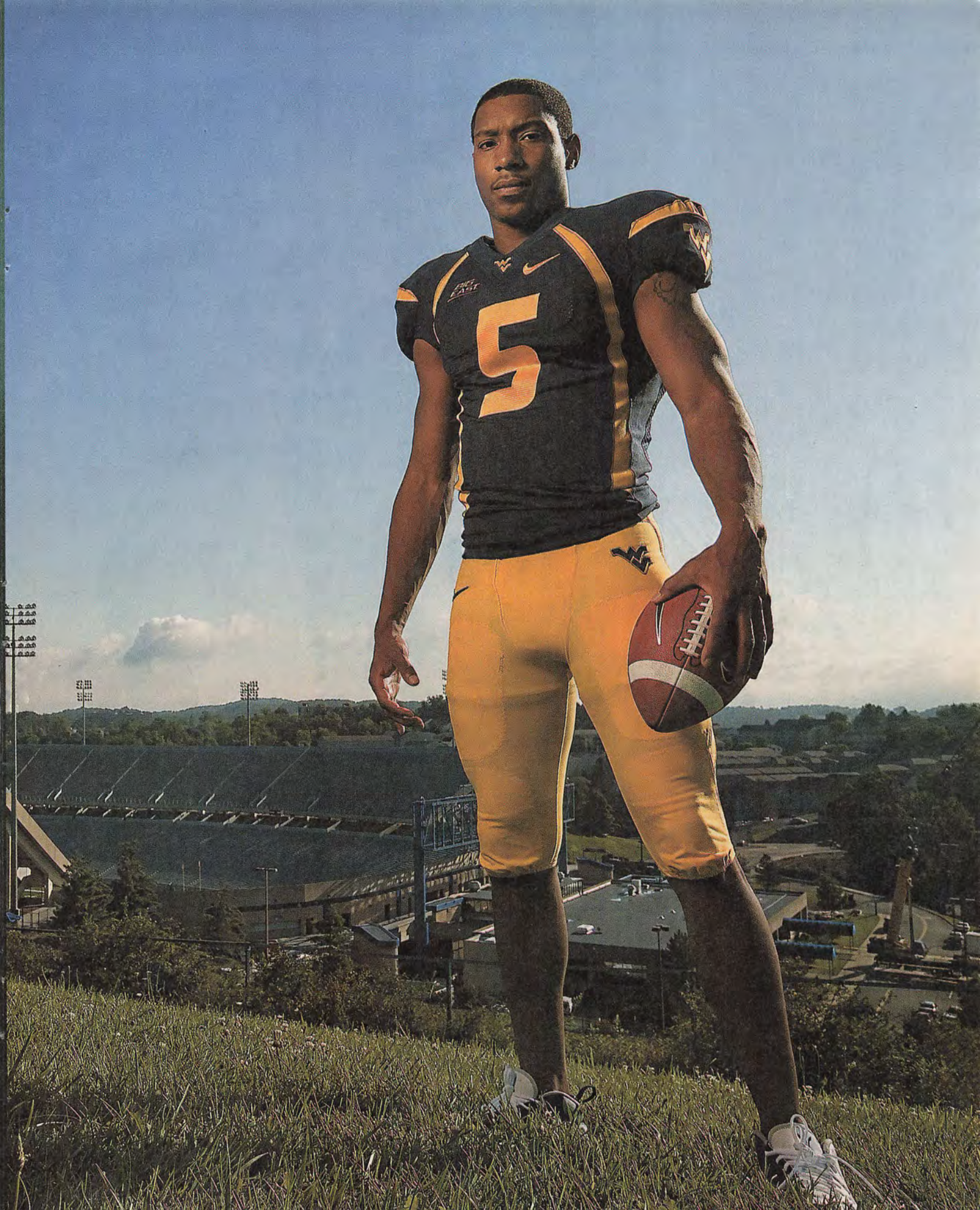


Photo by
Fred Barnes for SN



BIG TEN: Arrelious Benn, WR, Illinois

Arrelious Benn hears *game-breaker* and thinks Jerry Rice. He remembers highlight reels full of smooth strides, soft hands and touchdowns by the bushel. "You want to be a guy where the defense says, 'Any time that guy gets the ball, a big play can happen,'" Benn says.

Benn fit that description last season, when he helped lift the Fighting Illini to a share of second place in the Big Ten and the program's first Rose Bowl trip since 1984. The team's top receiver and return man and an occasional runner, he averaged 9.7 yards per touch on offense. Benn broke out in Illinois' victory over Penn State, when he caught a 29-yard touchdown pass and took a kickoff 90 yards for another score.

The crazy part? Benn played the whole season—in which he won multiple Freshman All-American honors—with one healthy arm. Benn hopes last winter's surgery and an offseason of rehabilitation have cured those issues.

"A lot of times I wasn't 100 percent last year," he says. "I played like that the whole season. It feels real good right now."

Benn at full strength should scare Illinois' opponents. He finished his Washington, D.C., high school career as one of the nation's most touted recruits and stunned some observers by choosing coach Ron Zook's struggling Illini program over traditional powers Florida State and Notre Dame.

Despite a strong freshman season, Benn remains a far cry from Rice and Reggie Bush, his other game-breaking role model. Benn worked on his speed this offseason and wants to boost his touchdown total from last season's three.

His five catches for 80 yards and a TD in the Rose Bowl loss against USC put a personal exclamation point on the year. Entering this season, everyone knows any time Benn gets the ball, a big play can happen. —Dave Curtis



PAC-10: Joe McKnight, RB, USC

Photo by
Max Morse for SN

Joe McKnight scooped up a loose ball well behind the line of scrimmage, burst through an opening near the right sideline, cut back across the middle of the field and—finally!—was off to the races. Heading toward paydirt, McKnight seemed to cross the intersection of exquisite promise and belated glory, his rather disappointing freshman season at USC (could anyone have lived up to *that* hype?) suddenly bathed clean in the Pasadena sun.

But then, just as strikingly as the 65-yard scamper had begun, it ended in a flash short of the Illinois goal line—cornerback Vontae Davis, himself a budding star, ran down McKnight from behind. In front of millions of Rose Bowl viewers, to boot. Wasn't that supposed to be impossible?

If we learned anything from McKnight's freshman season, it's that all those Reggie Bush comparisons—not only from recruiting analysts and writers but from USC's football offices as well—were, at

best, a tad premature.

But that doesn't mean they were off-base. McKnight is one of the fastest players in college football. (His 40 time is better than Davis', too.) Although Bush made a bigger overall contribution to USC's offense as a freshman, their first-year rushing numbers (521 yards, 5.8 yards per carry for Bush; 540 and 5.7 for McKnight) were almost identical. And Trojans coach Pete Carroll foresees a major breakout for McKnight for two very exciting reasons: "We're going to line him up some at wide receiver because he runs routes as a wide receiver better than Reggie did," Carroll says. "Joe has also gained 20 pounds without losing any speed."

That'll turn some heads. Matter of fact, it already has. "Joe was very skinny when he came in and not that strong," says senior All-American linebacker Brian Cushing. "When I hit him in the spring, it was obvious—he can brace himself now. He's a totally different player." —Steve Greenberg

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BIG 12: Jeremy Maclin, WR, Missouri

Jeremy Maclin's rundown of Missouri's best athletes starts with Danario Alexander.

"Man, you ever seen that guy jump?"

And William Moore.

"Two hundred thirty-five pounds and runs a 4.3—that's crazy.

"And what about ..."

Maclin is interrupted and asked about himself.

Slowly, a smile stretches across his face as he looks toward the ground, almost embarrassed.

"I'm one of them—I'll tell you that," he says.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the understatement of 2008.

After blowing out his knee the summer before

his true freshman season, Maclin redshirted in 2006 and absorbed the speed of the college game. Then, in 2007, he stepped on the college field and made that speed look slow.

"That kid is fast," Colorado safety Ryan Walters says. "Real fast."

As a freshman, Maclin was a consensus first-team All-American. He made teams as an all-purpose player, return specialist, kick returner and punt returner. His 2,776 all-purpose yards was the best in NCAA Division I-A history for a freshman and ranked fifth all-time among I-A players. He was the only player in the nation to score touchdowns receiving (nine), rushing (four) and on

punt (two) and kickoff (one) returns.

"You better have the proper angle on him," Kansas safety Darrell Stuckey says. "You've got to get there before he gets his eyes on you."

Now for the scary part: Maclin says he was a naive freshman last year. He's stronger, in better shape, has improved his blocking and route running and is better prepared mentally for his encore.

"Last summer, I was going out and doing the stuff that college students do," he says. "Saturday nights, my guys from high school are all going out and I'm staying in the bed. I'm more focused now."

—Derek Samson

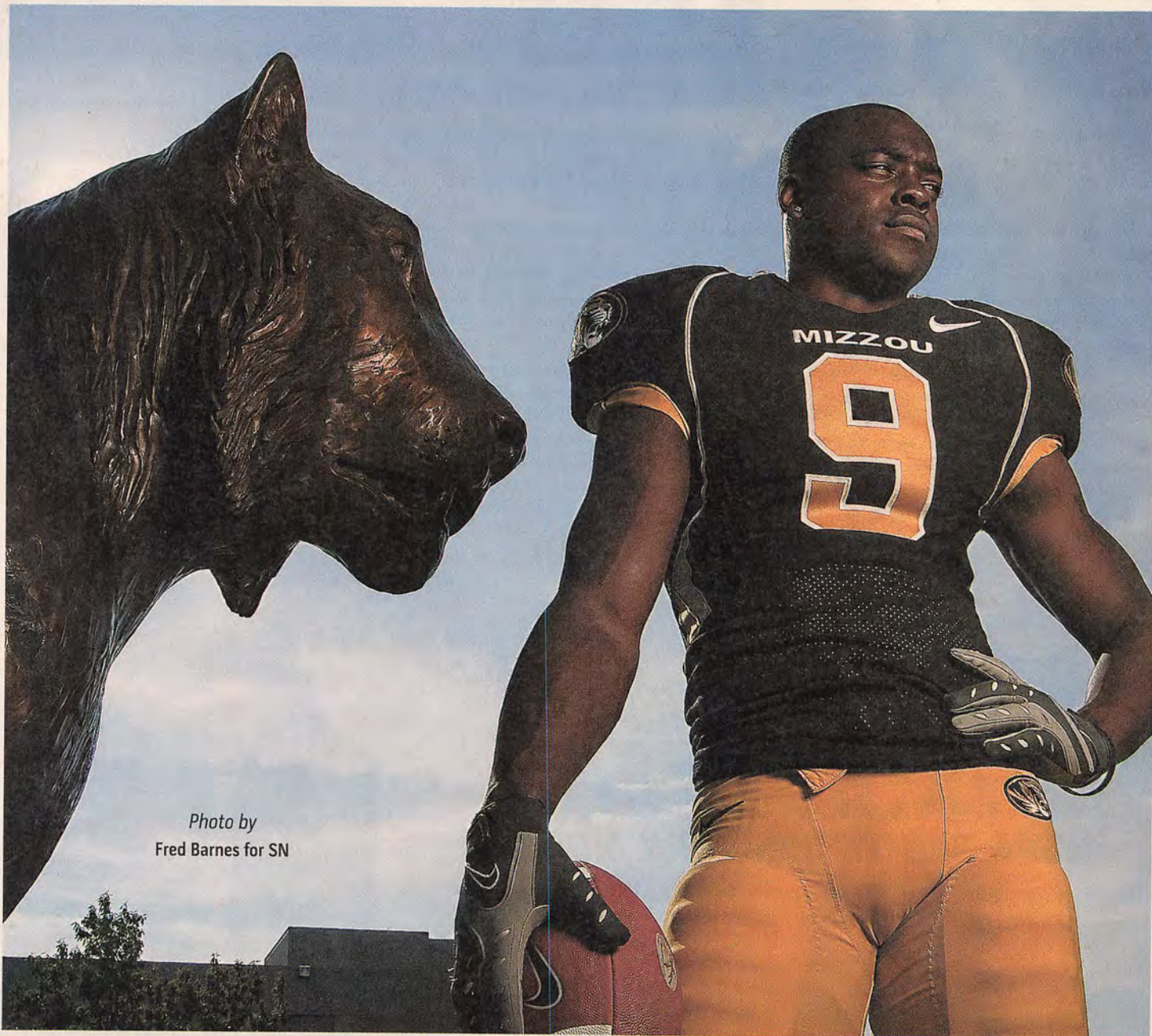


Photo by
Fred Barnes for SN

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ACC

By Matt Hayes

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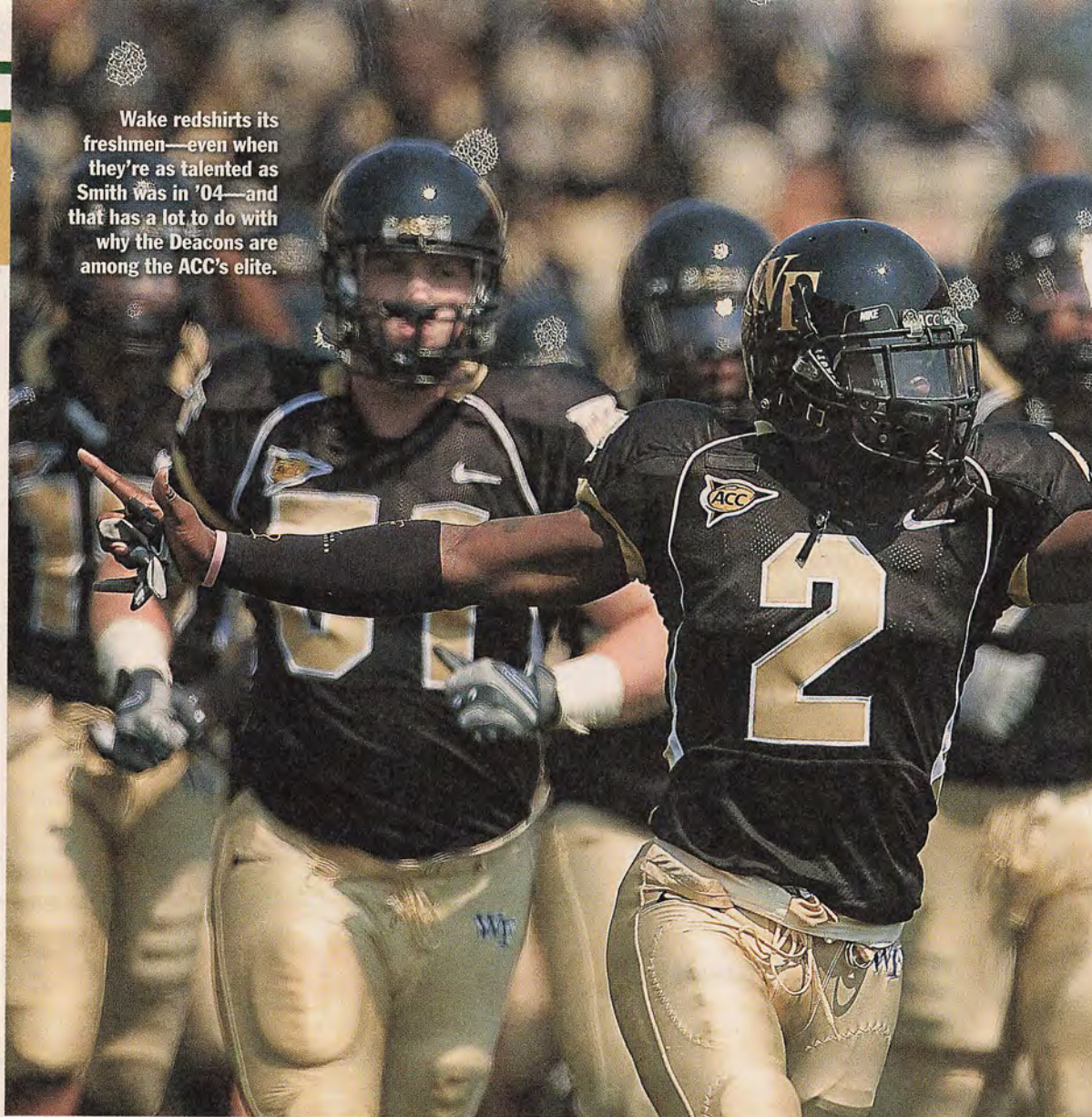
Atlantic

1. Clemson
2. Wake Forest
3. Florida State
4. N.C. State
5. Boston College
6. Maryland

Coastal

1. Virginia Tech
2. Miami
3. North Carolina
4. Georgia Tech
5. Virginia
6. Duke

Wake redshirts its freshmen—even when they're as talented as Smith was in '04—and that has a lot to do with why the Deacons are among the ACC's elite.



The Deacons have fought their way to the top

First week, three fights. This was Alphonso Smith's introduction to college football at Wake Forest.

The way he sees it, a guy has to make a statement—no matter the consequences.

"We won a state championship in high school, so I wasn't used to losing," says the senior cornerback. "I made that very clear."

That was 2004, four years and a history of bad football ago. That was before Wake Forest had made the unthinkable jump from passing time until basketball season starts to joining the elite of college football.

Ask no-frills coach Jim Grobe how it happened and the response is simple: patience. He had a plan, the administration believed in it, and now the university is in the middle of a \$40 million renovation of the stadium after the Deacons peeled off 20 wins and an ACC championship the past two seasons.

At Wake Forest.

"There's no magic potion," Grobe says. "It doesn't just happen overnight."

The key to the transformation isn't as secretive as you'd think. It

begins and ends with redshirting freshmen—there have been few exceptions—every season. Redshirting, Grobe says, allows players to acclimate and transition in Year 1 and, more important, gives the team mature fifth-year seniors every season.

Fifth-year seniors, in turn, can fill the role that blue-chip recruits fill at the more tradition-rich schools. Smith was one of those who redshirted in 2004, and so were linebacker Aaron Curry and kicker Sam Swank.

None of the three were highly recruited. All are *Sporting News* pre-season All-Americans. Of the 18 players who signed in 2004, 13 will play this season as fifth-year seniors—and eight are starters.

In eight recruiting classes at Wake, Grobe has had only one four-star recruit on a five-star scale. The rest are swimming in a sea of two-stars.

Smith first stepped on the field in 2005, and the Deacons lost seven games. They've lost seven in the past two seasons, and they're suddenly ACC heavyweights.

"A lot better than fighting," Smith says.

A lot better than losing, too.



GOING FOR TWO

SCOUT'S TAKE

A pro scout evaluates players' NFL prospects

TOP DOGS

1. Michael Johnson, DE, Georgia Tech.

Big and very athletic, Johnson has the tools to vault to the top of draft boards.

2. Darrius Heyward-Bey, WR, Maryland.*

This junior has good size, great hands and excellent speed—and a chance to be the top wide receiver in the 2009 draft.

3. Eugene Monroe, OT, Virginia.

He is the player who kept Branden Albert from playing left tackle at Virginia. Monroe has the size, strength and athletic ability NFL teams covet.

SLEEPERS

1. Brian Toal, LB, Boston College.

Toal has started at both linebacker and fullback. He missed the 2007 season with a shoulder injury, but coaches are expecting a big year from him.

2. Aaron Curry, LB, Wake Forest.

He hasn't received a lot of publicity, but NFL teams know about him. Everybody is watching to see how high he can climb with a big senior season.

3. Spencer Adkins, LB, Miami.

A backup throughout his career, Adkins has been very productive when he has played. With a strong senior season, he could put himself on the NFL map.

*Underclassman

Best coach

1. Jim Grobe, Wake Forest
2. Frank Beamer, Virginia Tech

Best coordinator

1. Bud Foster, Virginia Tech (defense)
2. Rob Spence, Clemson (offense)

Hottest seat

1. Bobby Bowden, Florida State
2. Randy Shannon, Miami

Best rivalry

1. Florida State vs. Miami
2. Virginia Tech vs. Virginia

Best game-day tradition

1. Howard's Rock, Clemson
2. "Enter Sandman," Virginia Tech

Best game

1. Clemson at Wake Forest (October 9)
2. Clemson at Florida State (November 8)

Hardest hitter

1. Clint Sintim, LB, Virginia
2. Vance Walker, DT, Georgia Tech

Most overrated

1. Miami's home-field advantage
2. Florida State's high-priced assistant coaches

Most underrated

1. Riley Skinner, QB, Wake Forest
2. **Preston Parker, WR, Florida State**

Will be worse than you think

1. Miami's offense
2. Florida State's offense

Will be better than you think

1. Georgia Tech's offense
2. Maryland

Toughest job

1. Mike MacIntyre, Duke defensive coordinator
2. Jimbo Fisher, Florida State offensive coordinator

SN All-conference team

OFFENSE

- QB** Riley Skinner, Jr., Wake Forest
- RB** James Davis, Sr., Clemson
- RB** Josh Adams, So., Wake Forest
- OL** Andrew Gardner, Sr., Georgia Tech
- OL** Sergio Render, Jr., Virginia Tech
- OL** Edwin Williams, Sr., Maryland
- OL** Rodney Hudson, So., Florida State
- OL** Jason Fox, Sr., Miami
- TE** Ryan Purvis, Sr., Boston College
- WR** Preston Parker, Jr., Florida State
- WR** Aaron Kelly, Sr., Clemson

DEFENSE

- DL** Michael Johnson, Sr., Georgia Tech
- DL** Vance Walker, Sr., Georgia Tech
- DL** Ron Brace, Sr., Boston College
- DL** Alex Albright, Jr., Boston College
- LB** Dave Philistin, Sr., Maryland
- LB** Clint Sintim, Sr., Virginia
- LB** Aaron Curry, Sr., Wake Forest
- DB** Alphonso Smith, Sr., Wake Forest
- DB** Victor Harris, Sr., Virginia Tech
- DB** Myron Rolle, Jr., Florida State
- DB** Michael Hamlin, Sr., Clemson

SPECIALISTS

- K** Sam Swank, Sr., Wake Forest
- P** Graham Gano, Sr., Florida State



PREDICTIONS

1 FSU will lose five games, and legendary coach Bobby Bowden will retire. But after yet another sluggish season on offense, how much of the program's struggles this decade will rub off on coach-in-waiting Jimbo Fisher?

2 North Carolina will make huge strides in its second season under coach Butch Davis, winning eight games (including a bowl game) and setting up a breakout season in 2009. After years of struggling since losing coach Mack Brown to Texas, the Tar Heels again will be a factor in the ACC championship race.

BIG EAST

By Dave Curtis



PROJECTED FINISH

1. West Virginia
2. South Florida
3. Connecticut
4. Pitt
5. Cincinnati
6. Louisville
7. Rutgers
8. Syracuse

South Florida must get comfortable as a front-runner

Now one of the Sunshine State's big-boy programs, South Florida is entering its eighth year of Division I-A football with adult-sized standards. After back-to-back nine-win seasons, the Bulls face the prospect of the sport's toughest leap—from good to great.

"It's a steeplechase barrier," says Jim Leavitt, the only coach in the program's 11-season history. "To win 10, 11 games, to get in that category, not many teams do that now."

South Florida, though, might be next. Following the lead of Kansas State and Virginia Tech, schools that jumped from patsies in the 1980s to powers in the 1990s, the Bulls possess all the ingredients to become conference champions and reach a big-money bowl game.

Leavitt's bunch sniffed success a year ago with a 6-0 start highlighted by victories over Auburn and West Virginia. South Florida was ranked second in the nation before dropping three straight conference games and finishing the season with a 56-21 Sun Bowl loss to Oregon, which

was playing with a backup quarterback. The coach and players chalked up the losses to laziness brought on by their lofty rise in the polls.

"We definitely got a little complacent," senior linebacker Brouce Mompremier says. "We were so used to being the underdogs, and then it was us being on top. We didn't respond well."

Mompremier says the Bulls, and especially their veteran leaders, still carry last season's scars as motivation. Junior quarterback Matt Grothe, who eclipsed 3,500 yards of total offense by himself last season, is back. Defensive end George Selvie, a consensus All-American, returns, too. South Florida needs to replace NFL draft picks Mike Jenkins and Trae Williams at cornerback but returns the bulk of its starters elsewhere.

That personnel could form a championship cast. All that's left is finally hoisting the trophy. "There are a lot of nevers for the University of South Florida," Leavitt says. "We still have a lot to climb to."

SN All-conference team

OFFENSE

- QB** Pat White, Sr., West Virginia
- RB** LeSean McCoy, So., Pitt
- RB** Andre Dixon, Jr., Connecticut
- OL** Ryan Stanchek, Sr., West Virginia
- OL** Ryan Schmidt, Sr., South Florida
- OL** Eric Wood, Sr., Louisville
- OL** Greg Isdamer, Jr., West Virginia
- OL** George Bussey, Sr., Louisville
- TE** Steve Brouse, Sr., Connecticut
- WR** Tiquan Underwood, Sr., Rutgers
- WR** Kenny Britt, Jr., Rutgers

DEFENSE

- DL** George Selvie, Jr., South Florida
- DL** Terrill Byrd, Sr., Cincinnati
- DL** Arthur Jones, Jr., Syracuse
- DL** Jamaal Westerman, Sr., Rutgers
- LB** Tyrone McKenzie, Sr., South Florida
- LB** Scott McKillop, Sr., Pitt
- LB** Reed Williams, Sr., West Virginia
- DB** Mike Mickens, Sr., Cincinnati
- DB** DeAngelo Smith, Sr., Cincinnati
- DB** Courtney Greene, Sr., Rutgers
- DB** Nate Allen, Jr., South Florida

SPECIALISTS

- K** Pat McAfee, Sr., West Virginia
- P** Kevin Huber, Sr., Cincinnati

Selvie (95) has the personal accolades. Is this the season he gets some team hardware, too?

SCOUT'S TAKE

A pro scout evaluates players' NFL prospects

TOP DOGS

1. George Selvie, DE, South Florida.* He is an athletic and explosive edge rusher who will make an immediate impact in the NFL.

2. Mike Mickens, CB, Cincinnati. He has good size and athleticism and the tools to climb draft boards. But Mickens will need a good showing in the 2008 season and at the Combine to solidify his status.

3. Courtney Greene, S, Rutgers. He nearly came out for the 2008 draft. Greene will be happy he didn't when he is one of the top three safeties in 2009.

SLEEPERS

1. Darius Butler, CB, Connecticut. Butler was better last season than Tyvon Branch, who became a fourth-round pick in the 2008 draft. And Butler is still improving.

2. Scott McKillop, LB, Pitt. He does not have ideal measurables, but he makes plays—and NFL teams notice that.

3. Terrill Byrd, DT, Cincinnati. He doesn't get much love because he lacks ideal size (6-1, 290), but don't be shocked when Byrd sticks in the NFL because of his athleticism and knack for making plays.

*Underclassman

Best quarterback

1. Pat White, West Virginia
2. Matt Grothe, South Florida

Best running back

1. **LeSean McCoy, Pitt**
2. Noel Devine, West Virginia

Hardest hitter

1. Courtney Greene, S, Rutgers
2. Scott McKillop, LB, Pitt

Best coach

1. Jim Leavitt, South Florida
2. Randy Edsall, Connecticut

Hottest seat

1. Greg Robinson, Syracuse
2. Dave Wannstedt, Pitt

Biggest misperception

1. Pitt sits on the doorstep of playing in a BCS bowl.
2. Louisville will struggle again and miss a bowl.

Will be better than you think

1. Louisville
2. Cincinnati

Will be worse than you think

1. Rutgers
2. Connecticut

Most overrated

1. West Virginia's home-field advantage
2. Rutgers' pass offense

Most underrated

1. **Cincinnati coach Brian Kelly**
2. Connecticut's defense

Toughest job

1. Syracuse recruiters
2. Players trying to tackle West Virginia RB Noel Devine

Best assistant

1. Doc Holliday, West Virginia associate head coach
2. Wally Burnham, South Florida defensive coordinator



PREDICTIONS

1 West Virginia will become the first team since the 2005 Mountaineers to be undefeated in conference play. But two nonconference losses, at East Carolina and at home against Auburn, will keep WVU out of the national title game again.

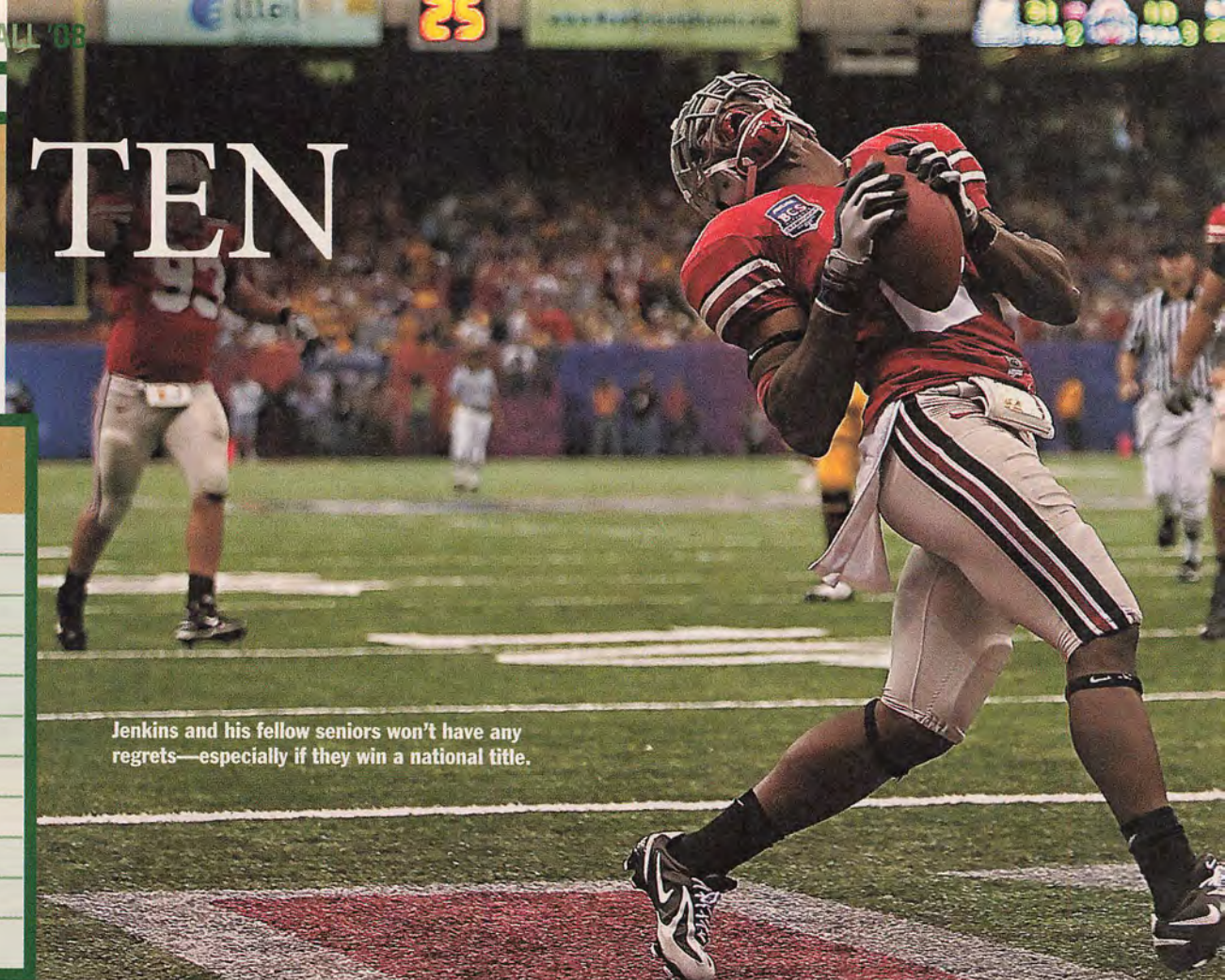
2 Bolstered by much-improved line play, Syracuse will win a few games and rise from laughing-stock to respectable. But season-ending losses at Notre Dame and Cincinnati will cost Greg Robinson his job at the end of his fourth season.

BIG TEN

By Dave Curtis

PROJECTED FINISH

1. Ohio State
2. Illinois
3. Wisconsin
4. Michigan
5. Purdue
6. Michigan State
7. Penn State
8. Northwestern
9. Iowa
10. Indiana
11. Minnesota



Jenkins and his fellow seniors won't have any regrets—especially if they win a national title.

The Buckeyes are back for one reason only

As LSU's national championship celebration roared through the Superdome, a handful of Ohio State juniors stood naked, showering off another season-ending loss. The past was too painful, so the talk turned to the future: Enter the draft early or take one last shot at a college football title?

"Come to find out," says cornerback Malcolm Jenkins, one of the showerers, "most of us were already leaning toward coming back. So we were like, 'Let's all finish this out together.'"

Finishing, as everyone seems to remind these Buckeyes, hasn't been easy in Columbus. Despite back-to-back outright Big Ten titles, OSU is defined across the country by its national championship game meltdowns against Florida and LSU the past two seasons.

The opportunity to change that legacy helped convince Jenkins, linebacker James Laurinaitis, receiver Brian Robiske and offensive lineman Alex Boone to postpone their NFL paydays. So, too, did conversations with recent alums—from Anthony Gonzalez and Troy

Smith to Mike Doss—about how things change in the NFL. The old guys' message? The money is great, but you'll miss school way too much.

"A lot of them wish they were back playing college ball," Laurinaitis says. "People do say, 'I left early, but I wish I had played all four years.' You never hear, 'I stayed, and I wish I had left early.'"

With the return of those key players, the Buckeyes remain a top five team and a favorite to win a third straight outright Big Ten title—something no program has accomplished. Laurinaitis and Jenkins head a defense that will get a boost from end Lawrence Wilson, who is returning from a broken leg and will replace first-round NFL pick Vernon Gholston. And junior Chris "Beanie" Wells, a Heisman Trophy candidate who rushed for 1,609 yards last year, will team with senior quarterback Todd Boeckman to lead the offense.

The goal, of course, is another trip to the national title game. This time, though, the Buckeyes hope to celebrate before they shower.



SN All-conference team

OFFENSE

- QB** Curtis Painter, Sr., Purdue
- RB** Chris Wells, Jr., Ohio State
- RB** Javon Ringer, Sr., Michigan State
- OL** Alex Boone, Sr., Ohio State
- OL** Kraig Urbik, Sr., Wisconsin
- OL** Sean Sester, Sr., Purdue
- OL** Ryan McDonald, Sr., Illinois
- OL** A.Q. Shipley, Sr., Penn State
- TE** Travis Beckum, Sr., Wisconsin
- WR** Arrelious Benn, So., Illinois
- WR** Brian Robiskie, Sr., Ohio State

DEFENSE

- DL** Maurice Evans, Jr., Penn State
- DL** Will Davis, Sr., Illinois
- DL** Terrance Taylor, Sr., Michigan
- DL** Greg Middleton, Jr., Indiana
- LB** Greg Jones, So., Michigan State
- LB** James Laurinaitis, Sr., Ohio State
- LB** Jonathan Casillas, Sr., Wisconsin
- DB** Malcolm Jenkins, Sr., Ohio State
- DB** Morgan Trent, Sr., Michigan
- DB** Vontae Davis, Jr., Illinois
- DB** Anthony Scirrotto, Sr., Penn State

SPECIALISTS

- K** Austin Starr, Sr., Indiana
- P** Jeremy Boone, Jr., Penn State

SCOUT'S TAKE

A pro scout evaluates players' NFL prospects

TOP DOGS

1. Chris Wells, RB, Ohio State.* Wells will be a top 10 pick if he comes out early. He has great size, explosiveness, speed, balance and running instincts.

2. Vontae Davis, CB, Illinois.* He's tall and has the muscular build, athleticism and toughness to be an elite NFL corner.

3. James Laurinaitis, LB, Ohio State. Laurinaitis is smart, instinctive and athletic. He makes plays all over the field and will be a first-round pick.

4. Malcolm Jenkins, CB, Ohio State. Jenkins, an elite athlete who has the talent to be a star corner or safety in the NFL, will go in the first round.

SLEEPERS

1. Travis Beckum, TE, Wisconsin. Don't be shocked when he is picked in the first or second round.

2. Javon Ringer, RB, Michigan State. He should be chosen in the second or third round.

3. Kraig Urbik, G, Wisconsin. He'll go in the second or third round and eventually become an NFL starter.

**Underclassman*

GOING FOR TWO

Best quarterback

1. Curtis Painter, Purdue
2. Kellen Lewis, Indiana

Best running back

1. Chris Wells, Ohio State
2. **Javon Ringer, Michigan State**

Hardest hitter

1. James Laurinaitis, LB, Ohio State
2. Anthony Scirrotto, S, Penn State

Best coach

1. Jim Tressel, Ohio State
2. Joe Paterno, Penn State

Hottest seat

1. Kirk Ferentz, Iowa
2. Joe Paterno, Penn State

Biggest misperception

1. Illinois will compete for Big Ten titles on a regular basis.
2. Ohio State's hardest game will be against USC.

Will be better than you think

1. Michigan State
2. Penn State

Will be worse than you think

1. Purdue
2. Michigan

Most overrated

1. The conference's BCS issues the past two years
2. Joe Paterno's contract status

Most underrated

1. Jim Tressel's gameday attire
2. Travis Beckum, TE, Wisconsin

Toughest job

1. Pat Fitzgerald, Northwestern coach
2. Tim Brewster, Minnesota coach

Best coordinator

1. Tom Bradley, Penn State (defense)
2. Jim Heacock, Ohio State (defense)



PREDICTIONS

1 Indiana's cushy early schedule means 10 Big Ten teams will be bowl-eligible again this season (Keep working, Gophers). At least one will get shut out, prompting league officials to push for the certification of another bowl, likely in Indianapolis.

2 Wisconsin will take out Ohio State at night in Madison, but the Badgers' national title hopes will end a month later in East Lansing. Both the Badgers and Bucks will end up playing in big bowls.

BIG 12

By Derek Samson

PROJECTED FINISH

North

1. Missouri
2. Kansas
3. Colorado
4. Nebraska
5. Kansas State
6. Iowa State

South

1. Oklahoma
2. Texas
3. Texas Tech
4. Oklahoma State
5. Texas A&M
6. Baylor

They pass, they score: Offense rules in the Big 12

Kansas safety Darrell Stuckey sensed something different about the Big 12 last year. Each week, he'd go against another spread offense, another scoreboard-cranking machine, another tireless passer.

And he'd think: This can't be normal.

On January 3, his suspicions were confirmed when Kansas beat the ACC champion, No. 5 Virginia Tech, in the Orange Bowl.

"In the Big 12, unlike the other conferences, we have diverse offenses," Stuckey says. "As a defense, we see all phases. When we played Virginia Tech, it wasn't like we hadn't seen an offense like that already. It was harder for them to adjust to our offense than it was for us to adjust to their offense."

Statistics back up Stuckey's claim. Four of the nation's top eight scoring teams last season—and seven of the top 22—came from the Big 12. The Big 12 boasted five of the top nine teams in total yards.

"It's one of the two best conferences in college football," Texas Tech coach Mike Leach says. "In our conference, you have quite a bit of diversity in what teams run because there are some really good coaches and you see a lot of things

come and go. There's more variety in this conference than the other ones."

The systems, from the Missouri spread to the Texas Tech circus, certainly deserve credit. But so do the athletes.

The nation's Nos. 1, 2 and 4 wide receivers (total catches) called the Big 12 home.

Oklahoma quarterback Sam Bradford led the country in passing efficiency as a freshman, and Texas Tech's Graham Harrell led the nation in passing yards with 5,705. One-third of the sport's top 15 in passing efficiency (Bradford, Harrell, Oklahoma State's Zac Robinson, Kansas' Todd Reesing, Missouri's Chase Daniel) hailed from the Big 12.

All five return, along with Texas junior Colt McCoy, who already ranks among his school's all-time passing leaders, and Kansas State's Josh Freeman, a potential NFL first-round draft pick.

"We have the most depth (at quarterback) of any conference," says Nebraska quarterback Joe Ganz, who threw for 1,399 yards and 15 touchdowns in his three starts. "I don't know if we have the most NFL potential because the guys are shorter and the NFL only looks at size. But from top to bottom, we have the best conference for quarterbacks."

Top 10 offenses in '07

Team	Yards per game
1. Tulsa	543.9
2. Texas Tech	529.6
3. Hawaii	512.1
4. Houston	501.9
5. Missouri	490.3
6. Louisville	488.0
7. Oklahoma State	486.3
8. Kansas	479.8
9. Nebraska	468.3
10. Oregon	467.5

Outside the top 10: 13. Texas; 19. Oklahoma; 40. Kansas State; 58. Texas A&M; 72. Colorado; 85. Baylor; 102. Iowa State.



SN All-conference team

OFFENSE

- QB** Chase Daniel, Sr., Missouri
- RB** Mike Goodson, Jr., Texas A&M
- RB** Marlon Lucky, Sr., Nebraska
- OL** Phil Loadholt, Sr., Oklahoma
- OL** Duke Robinson, Sr., Oklahoma
- OL** Jon Cooper, Sr., Oklahoma
- OL** Louis Vasquez, Sr., Texas Tech
- OL** Cedric Dockery, Sr., Texas
- TE** Chase Coffman, Sr., Missouri
- WR** Michael Crabtree, So., Texas Tech
- WR** Jeremy Maclin, So., Missouri

DEFENSE

- DL** Ian Campbell, Sr., Kansas State
- DL** George Hypolite, Sr., Colorado
- DL** Austin English, Jr., Oklahoma
- DL** DeMarcus Granger, Jr., Oklahoma
- LB** Sean Weatherspoon, Jr., Missouri
- LB** Joe Mortensen, Sr., Kansas
- LB** Joe Pawelek, Jr., Baylor
- DB** William Moore, Sr., Missouri
- DB** Nic Harris, Sr., Oklahoma
- DB** Chris Harris, So., Kansas
- DB** Jordan Lake, Jr., Baylor

SPECIALISTS

- K** Jeff Wolfert, Sr., Missouri
- P** Justin Brantly, Sr., Texas A&M

SCOUT'S TAKE

A pro scout evaluates players' NFL prospects

TOP DOGS

1. Duke Robinson, G, Oklahoma. Robinson isn't a premier athlete, but he's a big, physical player with the strength to become a very good NFL guard.

2. Jeremy Maclin, WR, Missouri.* Maclin has the quickness, elusiveness and speed to score every time he touches the ball, both as a receiver and return man.

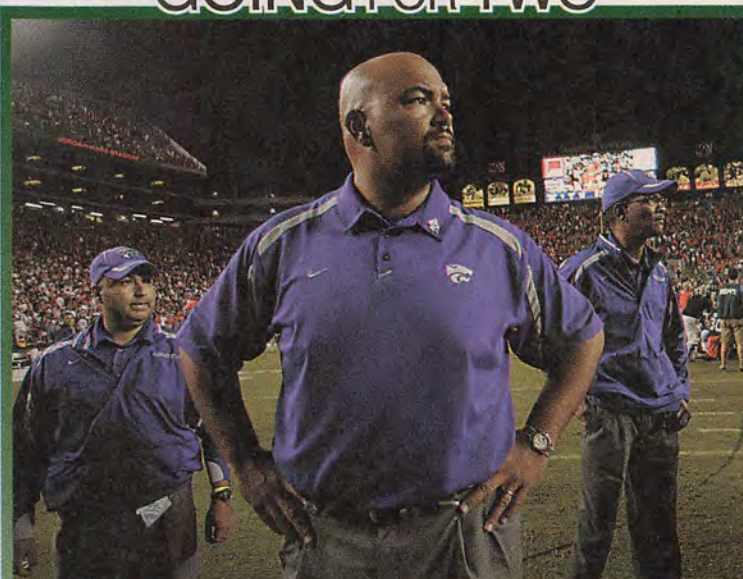
3. Michael Crabtree, WR, Texas Tech.* Crabtree was explosive in his redshirt freshman season. He has the size, hands and toughness to become a top NFL receiver.

SLEEPERS

1. Josh Freeman, QB, Kansas State.* Freeman, a junior, hasn't received a lot of hype, but NFL teams know who he is. He has the potential to be the top quarterback in the 2009 draft if he has a great season.

2. Brian Orakpo, DE, Texas. Well-built and athletic, Orakpo has the talent to become an NFL starter.

**Underclassman*



Biggest misperception

1. The South still rules this league
2. Texas Tech can't play defense

Hottest seat

1. **Ron Prince, Kansas State**
2. Mike Gundy, Oklahoma State

Will be better than you think

1. Colorado
2. Nebraska

Will be worse than you think

1. Oklahoma State
2. Kansas

Toughest dude

1. Joe Mortensen, LB, Kansas
2. William Moore, S, Missouri

Best quote

1. Mike Leach, coach, Texas Tech
2. George Hypolite, DT, Colorado

Most underrated

1. Josh Freeman, QB, Kansas State
2. Jorvorskie Lane, FB, Texas A&M

Best job

1. Graham Harrell, QB, Texas Tech
2. Texas Tech receivers

Toughest job

1. Baylor coach Art Briles
2. Baylor's starting quarterback

Freshman to watch

1. Darrell Scott, RB, Colorado
2. R.J. Washington, DE, Oklahoma

Best coordinator

1. Will Muschamp, Texas (defense)
2. Dave Christensen, Missouri (offense)

Best ranter

1. Oklahoma State coach Mike Gundy
2. Kansas coach Mark Mangino

PREDICTIONS

1 Missouri won't win its first Big 12 title. In typical Mizzou fashion—somehow, some way, somewhere—the Tigers will mess up their best shot to win it all. A stunning statistic: Missouri has not won a team championship in a men's sport during the 12-year existence of the Big 12.

2 Colorado freshman running back Darrell Scott will live up to the hype. Dan Hawkins' offense is on the verge of big things, and Scott is a perfect fit. Of course, a talent like Scott would be a perfect fit anywhere. Right, Texas?

Reesing



FROM LEFT: PAUL NISELY / SN; BOB LEVERONE / SN (2); JAY DROWNS / SN; ALBERT DICKSON / SN; DAVE MARTIN / AP

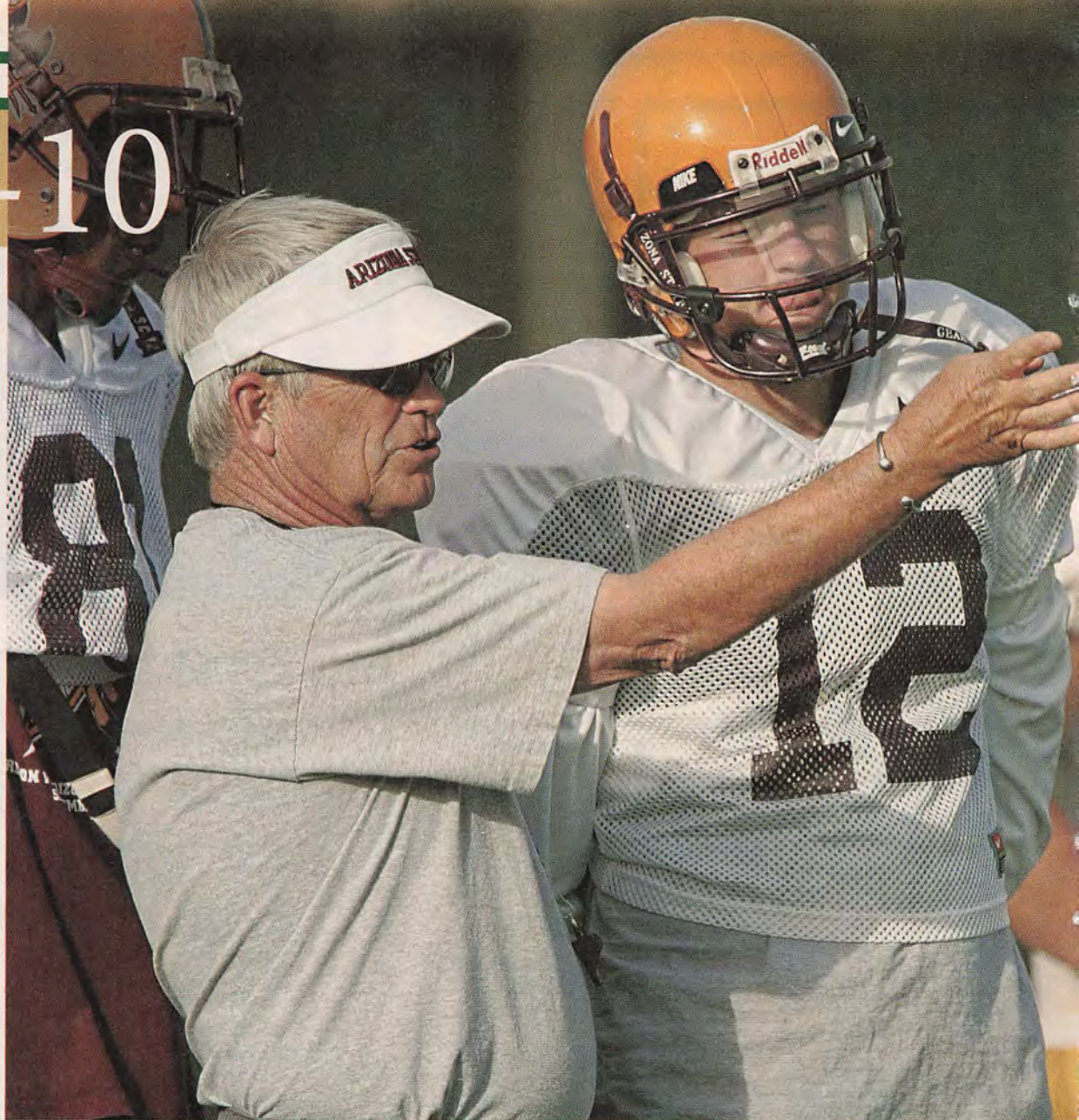
PAC-10

By Steve Greenberg

Carpenter is the Pac-10's most accomplished passer, and Erickson, although not the most visible, is right there among its most accomplished coaches.

PROJECTED FINISH

1. USC
2. Oregon
3. Arizona State
4. UCLA
5. California
6. Arizona
7. Oregon State
8. Stanford
9. Washington
10. Washington State



Look out above: Erickson has the Sun Devils rising

Like Pete Carroll's, his resume lists two NFL head coaching jobs and a pair of NCAA Division I championships among his many achievements.

Like Rick Neuheisel's, his bags have always been packed (and his critics hacked), good for promising new adventures and, indeed, quick getaways.

And like the rock star coaches of USC and UCLA, he is brash, addicted to winning and bound and determined to do it his way.

But a rock star, Dennis Erickson most assuredly is not. "Been there, done that," says the 61-year-old coach, who is entering his second season at Arizona State. "This is more fun, being an afterthought. They're more rock star-looking guys anyway."

Awash in the excitement Neuheisel has brought to the USC-UCLA turf war is the very existence of any other Pac-10 contenders. But no program is a more palpable threat to the Trojans' conference dynasty than Arizona State, which won 10 games in 2007

and returns 16 starters, including the conference's most accomplished passer, senior Rudy Carpenter.

And no program—with the exception of UCLA—has a coach who is more willing to throw down the gauntlet.

We know you're busy maintaining the perfect program, Coach Carroll, but you might want to listen up just for kicks and grins. Asked if the Sun Devils can catch USC faster than UCLA can, Erickson says: "Yeah, without question. There's no question in my mind. And that's what we're going to do. USC, what they are right now, that doesn't mean others, and not just the Sun Devils, aren't going to get there. Oregon beat them last year. Stanford beat them last year."

And USC pounded ASU by 20 points in Tempe. Of course, no one said catching one of the nation's top programs would be easy. Sometimes, an old, proven hand is better cut out for a job than a rock star.



SCOUT'S TAKE

A pro scout evaluates players' NFL prospects

TOP DOGS

1. Rey Mauluga, LB, USC. He has had NFL teams drooling since his freshman season, when he became the main man on USC's defense.

2. Alex Mack, OL, California. He's big, strong and athletic and has everything NFL teams are looking for. With another strong season, he should be a first-round pick.

SLEEPERS

1. Brian Cushing, LB, USC. The NFL knows all about this elite athlete who has started at both outside linebacker and defensive end. At linebacker this season, he should play his way into the first round.

2. Keegan Herring, RB, Arizona State. After backing up Ryan Torain for much of his career, Herring stepped up when Torain was hurt last season. With a big 2008, he could really climb the draft boards.

SN All-conference team

OFFENSE

QB Rudy Carpenter, Sr., Arizona State
RB Joe McKnight, So., USC
RB Keegan Herring, Sr., Arizona State
OL Alex Mack, Sr., California
OL Max Unger, Sr., Oregon
OL Andy Levitre, Sr., Oregon State
OL Alex Fletcher, Sr., Stanford
OL Eben Britton, Jr., Arizona
TE Rob Gronkowski, So., Arizona
WR Mike Thomas, Sr., Arizona
WR Brandon Gibson, Sr., Washington State

DEFENSE

DL Nick Reed, Sr., Oregon
DL Dexter Davis, Jr., Arizona State
DL Ruion Davis, Sr., California
DL Fili Moala, Sr., USC
LB Rey Mauluga, Sr., USC
LB Zack Follett, Sr., California
LB Brian Cushing, Sr., USC
DB Kevin Ellison, Sr., USC
DB Patrick Chung, Sr., Oregon
DB Brandon Hughes, Sr., Oregon State
DB Taylor Mays, Jr., USC

SPECIALISTS

K Thomas Weber, So., Arizona State
P Keenyn Crier, So., Arizona

GOING FOR TWO

Best shot at 4,000 passing yards

1. Willie Tuitama, Arizona
2. Rudy Carpenter, Arizona State

Best running back combo

1. Joe McKnight and Stafon Johnson, USC
2. Jeremiah Johnson and LeGarrette Blount, Oregon

Best unit

1. USC linebackers
2. Oregon secondary

Could pull a Stanford on USC

1. Arizona (October 25 in Tucson)
2. Stanford (November 15 in Palo Alto)

Won't be a Stanford if it beats USC

1. Arizona State (October 11 in Los Angeles)
2. UCLA (December 6 in Pasadena)

Best game not involving USC

1. Oregon at Arizona State (October 25)
2. UCLA at California (October 25)

Hottest seat

1. Mike Stoops, Arizona
2. Tyrone Willingham, Washington

Easy street

1. Pete Carroll, USC
2. Rick Neuheisel, UCLA

Will be better than you think

1. Oregon
2. Arizona

Will be worse than you think

1. Oregon State
2. Washington

Best coordinator

1. Norm Chow, UCLA (offense)
2. Mark Banker, Oregon State (defense)

Hardest hitter

1. Rey Mauluga, LB, USC
2. Patrick Chung, SS, Oregon



PREDICTIONS

1 Arizona will jump from seventh in the league in total offense in 2007 into a fight with Washington State (second in '07) for the top spot. Unlike the Cougars, the Wildcats will actually make it to a lower-tier bowl game.

2 Easy Street will turn a shade harder-scrabble for either Pete Carroll (if he loses right off the bat to Neuheisel) or, more likely, Slick Rick (if he takes it on the chin with a second-division Pac-10 debut). Or maybe for both.

SEC

By Matt Hayes

PROJECTED FINISH

East

1. Georgia
2. Florida
3. Tennessee
4. South Carolina
5. Kentucky
6. Vanderbilt

West

1. LSU
2. Auburn
3. Alabama
4. Mississippi State
5. Arkansas
6. Mississippi

Murphy is Florida's fastest player—and on this team, that's saying something.

If speed kills, the Gators will win the SEC race

On the day he arrived at Florida, coach Urban Meyer predicted he would someday have the fastest team in the nation.

Line 'em up, folks. No one touches this group.

There's wideout Louis Murphy, the team's fastest player and the best deep threat in the SEC. Next up: redshirt freshman tailback Chris Rainey, who earlier this summer challenged incoming freshman wideout Jeff Dumps—a record-setting high school sprinter and one of the fastest men in the world—in a 40-yard dash. And won.

Then there's this guy Percy Harvin, a blazing all-SEC wideout who—get this—is the slowest of the aforementioned group.

"If Percy is the slowest," says Florida quarterback Tim Tebow, "I can't imagine the fastest."

Now imagine this: the reigning Heisman Trophy winner walking to the line of scrimmage with Murphy and Harvin on the outside, Dumps in the slot and Rainey at tailback. Meyer has hinted he's considering playing Rainey and speedy punt/kick returner Brandon James in the



same backfield.

So which guy do you double-team?

"I don't know if Demps can catch the ball," Meyer says. "But he's fast as hell."

The Gators also have a bruising, deceptively quick tailback (Emmanuel Moody). And backup wideout Deonte Thompson? Harvin swears *he* is the fastest player on the team.

"And he's going to be really good," Harvin says.

Florida averaged 42.5 points a game last season, and this offensive unit could be the most prolific in school history. That's a big statement considering some offenses in the Steve Spurrier years were downright scary.

Then again, with the way the Gators played on defense last year in big games—and the lack of experience in the front seven—they may need all the points they can get.

"I'm quite sure our defense will have it figured out," Tebow says.

And if they don't?

"Maybe we can find more ways to use that speed," Tebow says.

Like there aren't already enough ways.

SN All-conference team

OFFENSE

- QB** Tim Tebow, Jr., Florida
- RB** Knowshon Moreno, So., Georgia
- RB** Anthony Dixon, Jr., Mississippi State
- OL** Michael Oher, Sr., Mississippi
- OL** Jonathan Luigs, Sr., Arkansas
- OL** Andre Smith, Jr., Alabama
- OL** Anthony Parker, Sr., Tennessee
- OL** Ciron Black, Jr., LSU
- TE** Jared Cook, Jr., South Carolina
- WR** Percy Harvin, Jr., Florida
- WR** Kenny McKinley, Sr., South Carolina

DEFENSE

- DL** Ricky Jean-Francois, Jr., LSU
- DL** Greg Hardy, Jr., Mississippi
- DL** Sen'Derrick Marks, Jr., Auburn
- DL** Antonio Coleman, Jr., Auburn
- LB** Brandon Spikes, Jr., Florida
- LB** Jasper Brinkley, Sr., South Carolina
- LB** Rico McCoy, Jr., Tennessee
- DB** Derek Pegues, Sr., Mississippi State
- DB** Eric Berry, So., Tennessee
- DB** Captain Munnerlyn, Jr., South Carolina
- DB** Asher Allen, Jr., Georgia

SPECIALISTS

- K** Wes Byrum, So., Auburn
- P** Ryan Shoemaker, So., Auburn

SCOUT'S TAKE

A pro scout evaluates players' NFL prospects

TOP DOGS

1. Michael Oher, OT, Mississippi. He is a premier athlete for his position. Oher could be a high first-round pick.

2. Andre Smith, OT, Alabama.* Smith, a very good athlete, will have to keep his weight under control if he wants to play left tackle in the NFL.

3. Percy Harvin, WR, Florida.* Harvin is a big-time playmaker. The Gators would be smart to get him the ball more often.

SLEEPERS

1. Jason Watkins, OT, Florida. He reminds me a lot of Vanderbilt's Chris Williams, who was drafted in the first round in 2008.

2. Jeff Owens, DT, Georgia. He isn't well-known, other than by NFL scouts and SEC coaches, but he is a big, strong and athletic tackle with a ton of potential.

3. Jamon Meredith, OT, South Carolina. He brings good size, athleticism and experience to South Carolina's pass-happy offense.

*Underclassman



Best player

1. Tim Tebow, QB, Florida
2. Percy Harvin, WR, Florida

Best coach

1. Mark Richt, Georgia
2. Tommy Tuberville, Auburn

Best coordinator

1. Mike Bobo, Georgia (offense)
2. Dan Mullen, Florida (offense)

Hottest seat

1. Nick Saban, Alabama
2. Phil Fulmer, Tennessee

Best rivalry

1. Alabama vs. Auburn
2. Florida vs. Georgia

Best game-day tradition

1. "Saturday Night" in Tiger Stadium
2. Toomer's Corner at Auburn

Heaviest hitters

1. Jasper Brinkley, LB, South Carolina
2. Dannell Ellerbe, LB, Georgia

Most overrated

1. South Carolina's offense
2. Mississippi State's defense

Most underrated

1. **Jeremy Jarmon, DE, Kentucky**
2. Casey Dick, QB, Arkansas

Will be worse than you think

1. Tennessee's defense
2. Mississippi State's offense

Will be better than you think

1. Derrick Locke, RB, Kentucky
2. Mississippi's offense

Toughest job

1. LSU's starting quarterback
2. Tommy Beecher, QB, South Carolina

PREDICTIONS

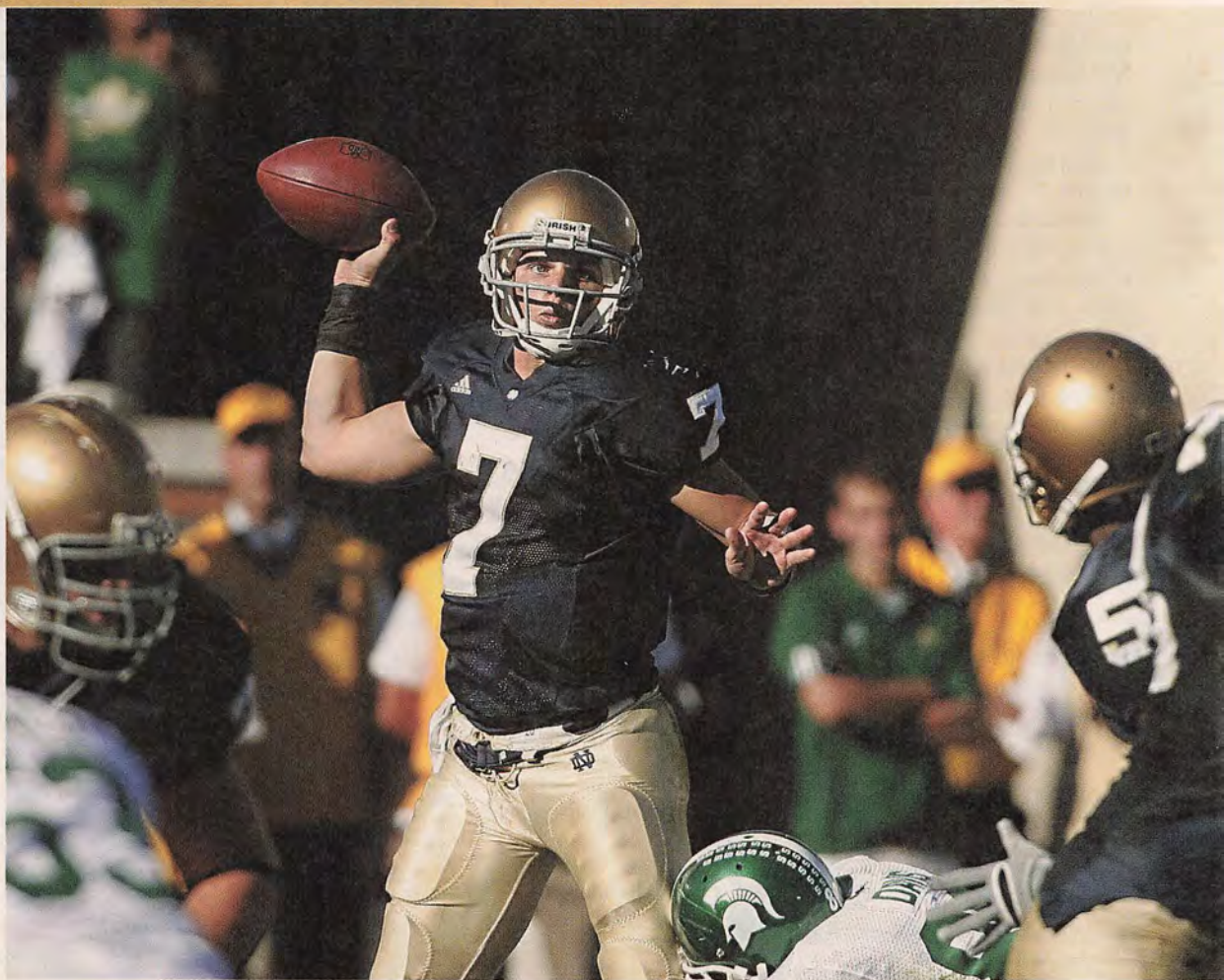
1 Tim Tebow will further develop in the Florida passing game and the Gators will play in a BCS bowl, but he will not repeat as Heisman Trophy winner. Fair or not, Tebow will be judged against the unthinkable numbers he put up last fall—and won't come close to matching them.

2 LSU will win at least 10 games for the fourth consecutive season under coach Les Miles. Forget about quarterback issues; this team is too talented on the line of scrimmage and too deep at the skill positions to lose more than two games.

OTHER SCHOOLS

By Matt Hayes

Don't judge Clausen—or the Irish—on what happened at Notre Dame last season.



Clausen's encore might shut down the laughter

Everyone is laughing and loving it, just eating it up. The punk kid with the big ego got what was coming to him.

What did Jimmy Clausen expect when he rolled into South Bend in a stretch limo, flashed his high school championship rings and announced his presence and *championship* future under the Golden Dome? Hell, he was practically begging for it.

"I know what they're thinking," says the Notre Dame quarterback as he prepares for his sophomore season. *"He got what he deserved."*

Who in the world deserved that mess? An offensive line that couldn't protect (it gave up a school-record 58 sacks), a coaching staff that didn't have an answer and enough ugly to make even the heartiest Domer start questioning just who this hotshot really was.

"I'll tell you who he is," says Notre Dame coach Charlie Weis. "A guy who, if we can protect—and I think we can—has a chance to have a big season."

If he does, that awful 3-9 record will become a more distant flash

in the rearview—for both Clausen and Weis. The Irish are not that far from checking back into the football elite.

Notre Dame is loaded with young skill players on offense; it has a deep and talented backfield and physical receivers who can help Clausen by winning individual battles at the line of scrimmage. The problem is protection.

By the end of last season, not one starter on the line weighed more than 300 pounds. Going into this fall, all five probably will top 300—and, according to Weis, all have decreased their body fat.

But it wasn't just the line. Young running backs failed to recognize blitz packages. That won't cut it if Clausen wants to flash that same championship smile.

"One season doesn't define who you are," he says.

Nor should the silly way in which he announced his commitment to Notre Dame.

GOING FOR TWO

SCOUT'S TAKE

A pro scout evaluates players' NFL prospects

TOP DOGS

1. Jarett Dillard, WR, Rice. He isn't well-known nationally, but Dillard is a big-time receiver and a likely second- or third-round pick.

2. Ian Johnson, RB, Boise State. He made the right decision to return for his senior season. With a strong year, Johnson could lift himself into the second or third round.

3. Jason Phillips, LB, TCU. Phillips (6-1, 234) is slightly short for a linebacker, but he is a very good athlete with the speed to make plays all over the field. A big season could make him a third-round pick.

SLEEPERS

1. Chase Holbrook, QB, New Mexico State. NFL people know who he is and really like his passing skills and smarts.

2. Maurice Crum, LB, Notre Dame. He's a solid second-day prospect who should make it in the NFL.

Best player

1. Dan LeFevour, QB, Central Michigan
2. Ian Johnson, RB, Boise State

Best coach

1. Bronco Mendenhall, BYU
2. Chris Petersen, Boise State

Best coordinator

1. Jon Tenuta, Notre Dame (defense)
2. Bryan Harsin, Boise State (offense)

Hottest seat

1. Mike Sanford, UNLV
2. Chuck Long, San Diego State

Best rivalry

1. Notre Dame vs. USC
2. BYU vs. Utah

Best game-day tradition

1. Notre Dame student section
2. Air Force pregame flyover

Hardest hitter

1. Jason Phillips, LB, TCU
2. Solomon Elimimian, LB, Hawaii

Most overrated

1. Hal Mumme, coach, New Mexico State
2. MAC teams as BCS killers

Most underrated

1. Skip Holtz, coach, East Carolina
2. Jarett Dillard, WR, Rice

Will be worse than you think

1. UCF
2. Hawaii's offense

Will be better than you think

1. Nate Davis, QB, Ball State
2. Utah's defense

Toughest job

1. Bush Hamdan, QB, Boise State
2. Joe Lee Dunn, defensive coordinator, New Mexico State

PREDICTIONS

1 Notre Dame will give up fewer than half the sacks it did last fall (58), and the Irish will win nine games and play in the Gator Bowl. Quarterback Jimmy Clausen will develop into one of the game's best pure passers.

2 This will be Boise State's final year in the WAC. The city of Boise holds the rights to the Humanitarian Bowl, and the Mountain West Conference wants in. Boise State will be the benefactor when the city and university negotiate expansion into the MWC.

PLAYER TO WATCH

Ian Johnson, RB, Boise State

The numbers: As Johnson's sensational college career comes to a close, he has a chance to finish among the all-time NCAA leaders in touchdowns (46 entering 2008) and rushing yards (3,418).

Did you know ... His father, Sterling, is a Los Angeles firefighter who coached his kids in youth leagues. Johnson's Fiesta Bowl heroics after the 2006 season earned a mention in the March/April 2007 edition of *The Los Angeles Firefighter*.

What's on tap: Johnson's Broncos became America's favorite underdogs after upsetting Oklahoma in the Fiesta Bowl, which ended with Johnson's game-winning 2-point conversion. Afterward, he proposed to his girlfriend on the field. Two seasons later, Boise State is an underdog in its own conference, expected to chase rival Fresno State in the WAC race.

What they're saying: "He has a chip on his shoulder. He's anxious to get back to the running style and form he had (in 2006) and cut it loose. One thing that is going to help Ian is the depth we have at that position, so we don't have to play him every down." —Boise State coach Chris Petersen at the WAC preseason media days



Wrangler

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Bowl lineup and projections

Liberty



South Carolina's second bowl visit to Memphis in three seasons isn't exactly the foundation for winning SEC championships. Could **Steve Spurrier** say the heck with it and hit the golf course for good? Maybe—if the Gamecocks can't contain Tulsa running back Tarrion Adams or slow wideout Brennan Marion.

Music City

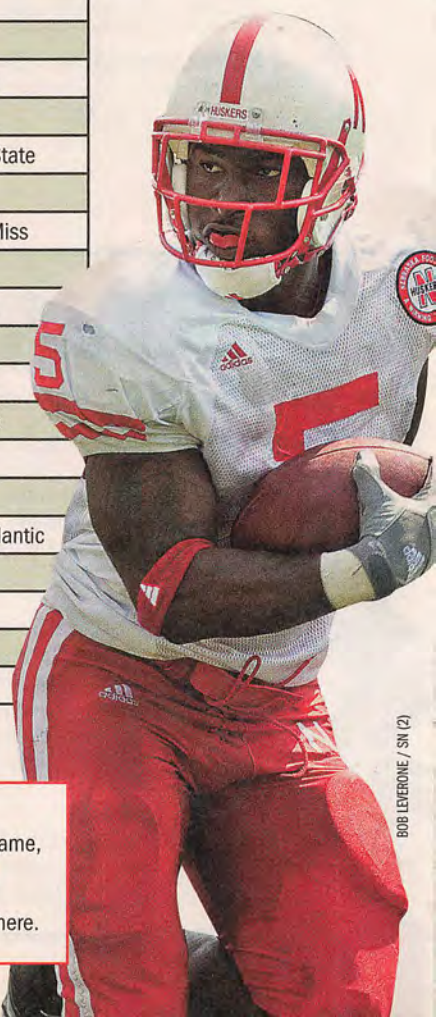
Mississippi State makes its second straight bowl appearance because its back seven, led by free safety Derek Pegues, is loaded. Good thing because the offense likely will struggle again. N.C. State hasn't been to a bowl the past two years, but Tom O'Brien will guide the Wolfpack to a postseason berth in his second season as coach.

Bowl	Date	Site	Time (ET), TV	SN projection
BCS national championship	January 8	Miami	8 p.m., FOX	Georgia vs. Ohio State
Fiesta	January 5	Glendale, Ariz.	8 p.m., FOX	Oklahoma vs. Oregon
Sugar	January 2	New Orleans	8 p.m., FOX	Missouri vs. Florida
Orange	January 1	Miami	8 p.m., FOX	Clemson vs. West Virginia
Rose	January 1	Pasadena, Calif.	4:30 p.m., FOX	USC vs. Illinois
GMAC	January 6	Mobile, Ala.	8 p.m., ESPN	UCF vs. Miami (Ohio)
International	January 3	Toronto	Noon, ESPN2	Cincinnati vs. Central Michigan
Liberty	January 2	Memphis	5 p.m., ESPN	Tulsa vs. South Carolina
Cotton	January 2	Dallas	2 p.m., FOX	Texas vs. Tennessee
Capital One	January 1	Orlando	1 p.m., ABC	Wisconsin vs. LSU
Gator	January 1	Jacksonville	1 p.m., CBS	Wake Forest vs. Notre Dame
Outback	January 1	Tampa	11 a.m., ESPN	Michigan vs. Alabama
Chick-fil-A	December 31	Atlanta	7:30 p.m., ESPN	Virginia Tech vs. Auburn
Insight	December 31	Tempe, Ariz.	5:30 p.m., NFL Network	Michigan State vs. Oklahoma State
Music City	December 31	Nashville	3:30 p.m., ESPN	N.C. State vs. Mississippi State
Sun	December 31	El Paso, Texas	2 p.m., CBS	Pitt vs. UCLA
Armed Forces	December 31	Fort Worth, Texas	Noon, ESPN	Houston vs. Utah
Texas	December 30	Houston	8 p.m., NFL Network	South Florida vs. Colorado
Holiday	December 30	San Diego	8 p.m., ESPN	Kansas vs. Arizona State
Humanitarian	December 30	Boise, Idaho	4:30 p.m., ESPN	North Carolina vs. Fresno State
Alamo	December 29	San Antonio	8 p.m., ESPN	Purdue vs. Texas Tech
Papajohns.com	December 29	Birmingham, Ala.	3 p.m., ESPN	Connecticut vs. Southern Miss
Independence	December 28	Shreveport, La.	8 p.m., ESPN	Nebraska vs. Arkansas
Emerald	December 27	San Francisco	8 p.m., ESPN	Georgia Tech vs. California
Champs Sports	December 27	Orlando	4:30 p.m., ESPN	Miami vs. Penn State
Meineke Car Care	December 27	Charlotte	1 p.m., ESPN	Florida State vs. Rutgers
Motor City	December 26	Detroit	7:30 p.m., ESPN	Northwestern vs. Ball State
Hawaii	December 24	Honolulu	8 p.m., ESPN	Arizona vs. Nevada
Poinsettia	December 23	San Diego	8 p.m., ESPN	Iowa vs. TCU
New Orleans	December 21	New Orleans	8 p.m., ESPN	East Carolina vs. Florida Atlantic
Las Vegas	December 20	Las Vegas	8 p.m., ESPN	Oregon State vs. BYU
St. Petersburg	December 20	St. Petersburg, Fla.	4:30 p.m., ESPN2	Louisville vs. UTEP
Congressional	December 20	Washington	11 a.m., ESPN	Virginia vs. Navy
New Mexico	December 20	Albuquerque, N.M.	2:30 p.m., ESPN	Boise State vs. Air Force

Text by Jim Gilstrap

Independence

Shreveport isn't what Bo Pelini and Bobby Petrino were thinking when they signed up for these jobs, but it's a bowl game, right? The Huskers have weapons with running back **Marlon Lucky** and quarterback Joe Ganz, but the defense must improve—no secret in Lincoln or anywhere else—to get them here.



BOB LEVERONE / SN (2)

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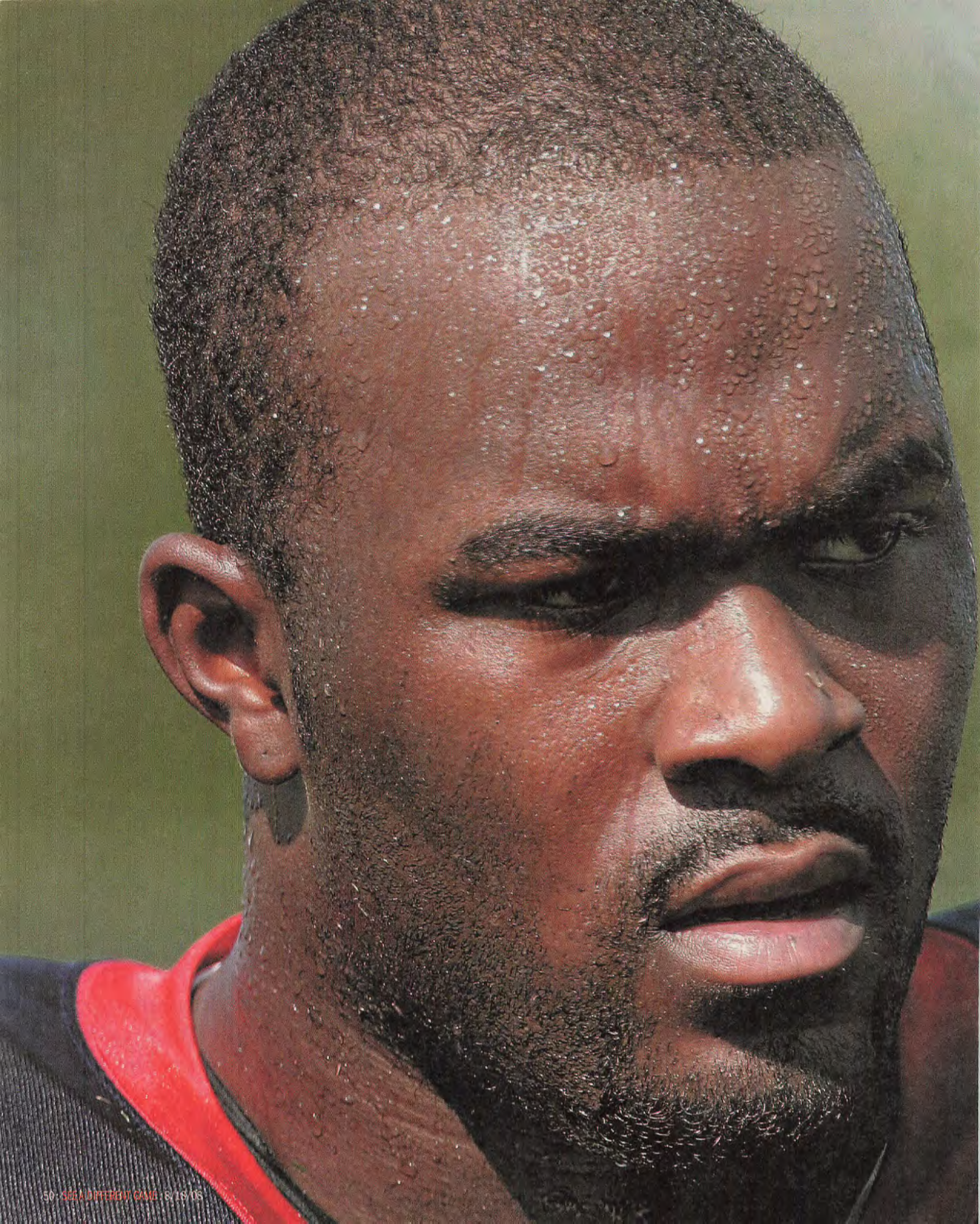
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Q&A It's Mario's time

When Texans defensive end **Mario Williams** broke out with 14 sacks last season, he stuffed any bust talk for good. Now look what's on his to-do list.

By Steve Greenberg

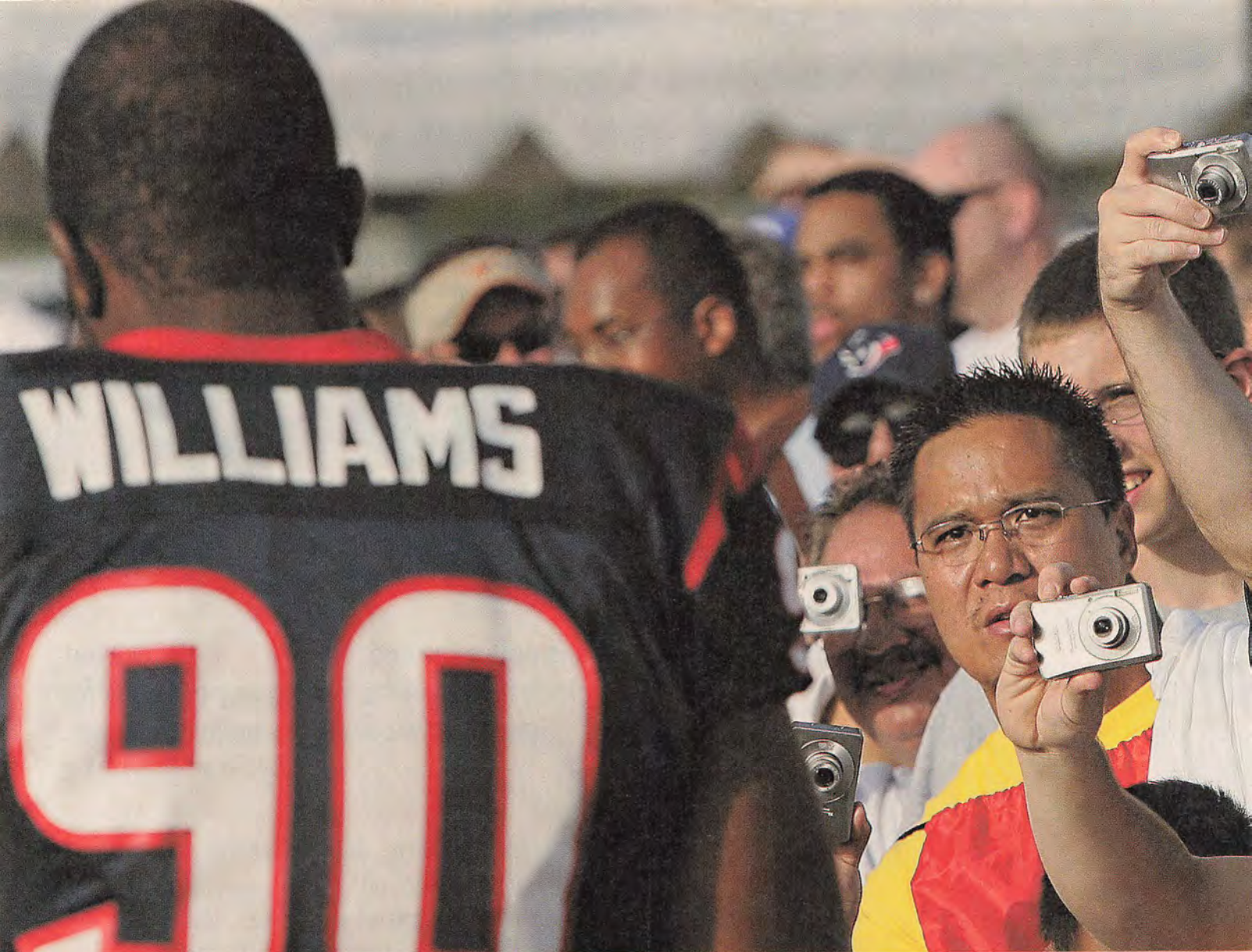
After tantalizing Texans fans with two sacks in the 2007 opener, almost half his rookie output of 4½ (weak!), Mario Williams had but one over the next six games. Super Mario? Please.

Williams—former No. 1 overall pick and proprietor of the best body in football—was more like a super-size bust.

But then (not all that belatedly, when you really think about it) it happened. *It* being the sudden, spectacular destruction of everything in his path. From Week 8 on, no one in the league had more sacks than Williams' 11. He finished with 14, only 1½ behind league leader Jared Allen.

It's Year 3. No more *bust* talk. But not necessarily a lot of buzz, either; Williams plays, after all, for the lowest-profile franchise in the NFL.

Well, wake up, people: We've got your next 20-sack man right here.



Williams is a focal point at camp—and for good reason. He could be the next 20-sack guy.

SN: You're no Pro Bowler, buddy. Weren't you tied for third in the league in sacks last season?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, but as far as how it happened, I don't have any control over that. Just do your thing and play ball. When it comes down to voting—when there's bias from other people—I really don't expect anything.

SN: Why would anybody be biased against you?

WILLIAMS: I don't know. They're crazy.

SN: Who out there is still a little bit better than you at defensive end?

WILLIAMS: I really can't say. I think at my position there's so much diversity, especially now. A lot of guys are so much smaller than myself; a lot of guys are pretty much linebacker size. There aren't a lot of true defensive ends.

SN: Then let's go old-school. Who's your all-time favorite?

WILLIAMS: Reggie White, no doubt. He was

Scouting report *By Real Scouts*

Mario Williams, DE, 6-7, 291

Strengths: Possesses excellent size, speed, and athleticism. Is smooth and fluid in his movements. Has outstanding initial explosiveness and beats most offensive linemen with his first step. Gets to top speed immediately. A natural pass rusher who has developed strong countermoves to complement his great speed rush off the edge. Has long arms to control and shed blockers. Does a good job of keeping linemen off his body. Is a strong run defender with good lateral speed and quickness. Can string out runs to the sideline and make plays in pursuit.

Weaknesses: Needs to continue to improve his overall strength and fill out his big frame. Plays too upright at times. Has improved his ability to diagnose plays but still takes false steps and tries to rely on his quickness and change-of-direction skills to get back in the play.

Bottom line: Williams is an outstanding athlete who is catching up to the NFL game. With increased strength and bulk and an improved lineup around him, he can become one of the NFL's top ends in short order.

Real Scouts, a team of pro football scouts, analyzes NFL players, coaches and teams exclusively for Sporting News.



one of those guys who did it with power and speed and the size behind it. I grew up watching big guys like that. They made me want to play the position.

SN: How many sacks for you this year? Are you going for 20? Going for Michael Strahan's record (22½)?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. Every year that I play, I want to lead the league. That's the goal, to go for that. Hopefully, one day my name will be up there. I want the career record (Bruce Smith, 200 sacks). My whole thing is if anybody stays healthy, anybody can achieve anything.

SN: Give us your top three reasons you get to the quarterback.

WILLIAMS: 1. Separation. The coaches help me to break down film and get in the right position to get that separation from blockers. 2. My athleticism. 3. It's pretty much all about want-to. In the fourth quarter, you've got to dig down to go get it.

SN: Would you rather beat a double-team for half a sack or go unblocked for a blindside solo shot?

WILLIAMS: Definitely the double-team because those are the ones that come down to want-to. You've got this pretty much impossible chance, with two guys who are 300 pounds blocking you, but then you just fight through and muscle through.

SN: You ever want to strangle Peyton Manning?

WILLIAMS: Nah, I don't. Obviously, we see him every year. I definitely want to hit him, don't get me wrong. I'm not going to say he's cocky; he's just real confident.

SN: Is Manning the best QB in the league?

WILLIAMS: Tom Brady. Because I think him alone, with the things he had to go through, he has still been able to come out and show he's capable of greatness. After where he started out, drafted in the sixth round, and then waiting behind Drew Bledsoe, he didn't have it the easy way.

SN: The whole "freak" thing—40½-inch vertical, 35 bench-press reps at 225, of course the 4.66 40—did that really capture what you were about as a football player when you were drafted? Did it oversimplify things?

WILLIAMS: I think the Combine is pretty much just a piece of the pie, an insight on the player. It all comes down to putting those things together. Nobody's going to bench while they're playing football. All those things can possibly tie together, good or bad.

SN: Your 2005 season at N.C. State was ridiculous (14½ sacks, 27½ tackles for loss). Did you experience a transformation that season when you went from good to real good, real good to holy-crap good?

WILLIAMS: Yeah. I think one of the things you look for is to feel more comfortable and finally click, and then you run with it.

SN: What kind of a student were you? I read you were often spotted in the library on Friday and

Ryans gives the Texans a 1-2 punch

Round 1: Mario Williams. Round 2: DeMeco Ryans. Only one of the Texans' 2006 draft picks has made the Pro Bowl, and it's the middle linebacker from Alabama who already has racked up 283 big league tackles.

"We call him Cap'n Meco," says Williams. "He's pretty much the heart, the center of us. He's running things right now."

The feelings are mutual—Ryans calls Williams the best defensive end in the business. And that's not all.

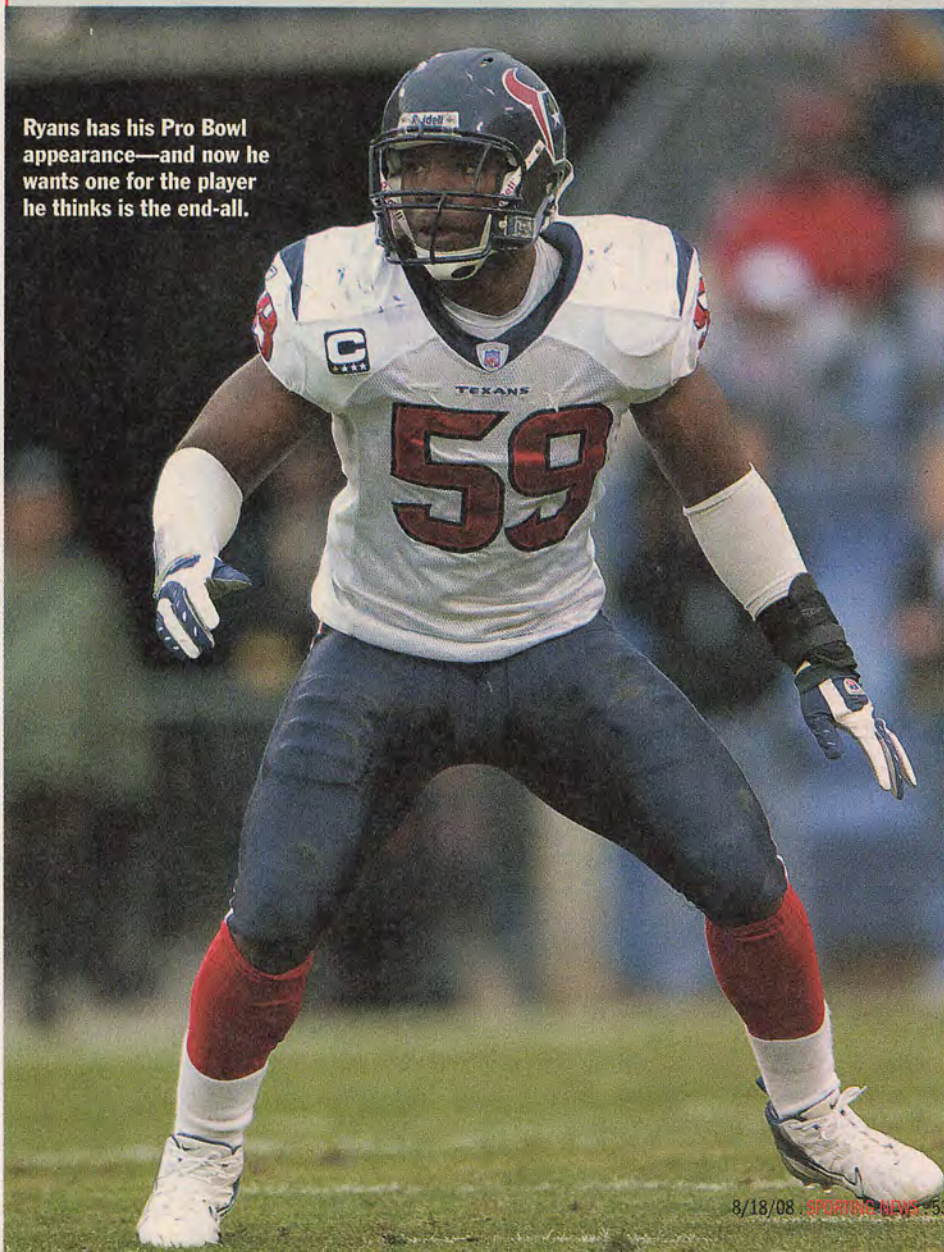
On Williams' development: "I watch his work ethic and just know he's the best. He's a totally different Mario—you're going to see him dominate every snap. He's worked on getting off the ball a lot quicker; now he's working on using his hands a lot more. But the most improved aspect of his game is his get-off."

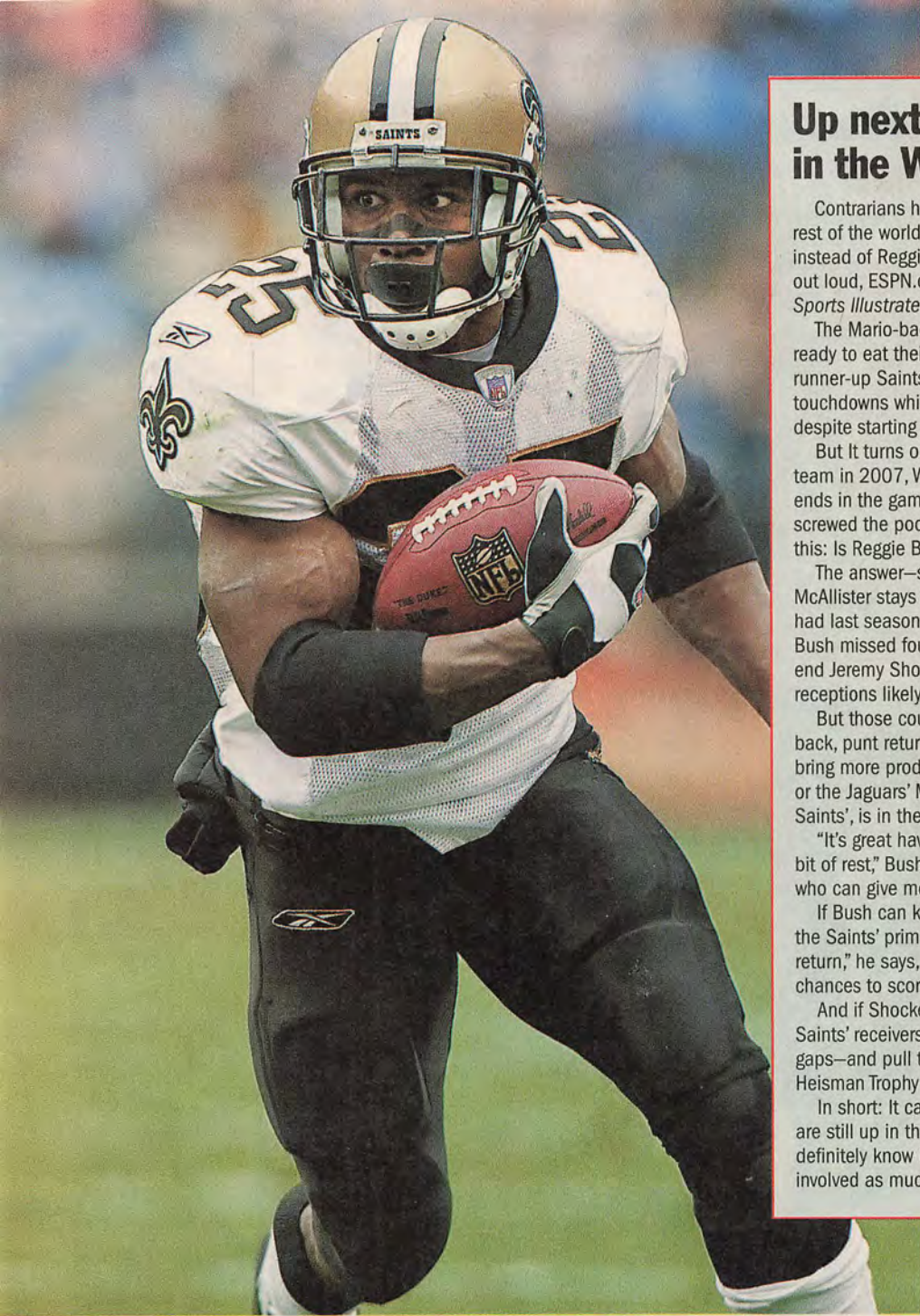
On when Williams became a star: "I would say last year in that Thursday night game against Denver. I think he had 3½ sacks. Watching his confidence level just pick up second to second, watching him work out there, it was unbelievable. The whole crowd was chanting 'Mar-i-o! Mar-i-o!' It was just fun. He did the hula dance."

On last season's Pro Bowl snub: "Obviously, he should have gone to the Pro Bowl. I was very, very surprised that he didn't make it. But I tell Mario: 'I feel like I should've gone my first year, but I didn't. Keep battling, you'll have many more to come.'"

On what they can accomplish together: "Our time is here. Our time is now. Let's step up to the plate. We've been knocking on the door getting better, year in and year out. It's time to turn it on and put the foot on the gas." —Steve Greenberg

Ryans has his Pro Bowl appearance—and now he wants one for the player he thinks is the end-all.





Up next: Round 3 in the Williams-Bush debate

Contrarians had a field day after the 2006 draft. That's because the rest of the world was pounding the Texans for drafting Mario Williams instead of Reggie Bush with the first pick of the draft. For crying out loud, ESPN.com's SportsNation gave the Texans' draft an F. *Sports Illustrated* gave it a D. Oh ... oops ... *Sporting News*, too.

The Mario-backers (or were they Bush-whackers?) probably were ready to eat their words after the '06 season, when Bush led the NFC runner-up Saints with 88 receptions and scored a total of nine touchdowns while Williams learned the hard way with only 4½ sacks despite starting all 16 games.

But it turns out they were right. As Bush faltered along with his team in 2007, Williams took his place as one of the best defensive ends in the game. But the question now isn't about which team screwed the pooch and which got the bell cow. Rather, it is simply this: Is Reggie Bush a star or isn't he?

The answer—sorry for the lack of conviction—is maybe. If Deuce McAllister stays healthy, Bush may have even fewer carries than he had last season (157), when McAllister played only three games and Bush missed four because of a variety of injuries. If free-agent tight end Jeremy Shockey does his four-time-Pro Bowler thing, Bush's receptions likely will drop as well.

But those could be good things. Bush—a born change-of-pace back, punt returner and overall “slash” stud—still has the skills to bring more production to his team than, say, the Bears' Devin Hester or the Jaguars' Maurice Jones-Drew. Bush's strength, much as the Saints', is in the team's numbers.

“It's great having Deuce because it gives me a chance to get a little bit of rest,” Bush says. “It's always great to have another back in there who can give me a break.”

If Bush can kick Lance Moore and Skyler Green to the curb and be the Saints' primary punt returner, all the better. “The more punts you return,” he says, “the better you become at it and the better your chances to score a touchdown.”

And if Shockey, wideout Marques Colston and the rest of the Saints' receivers hold up their end of the bargain, Bush can fill the gaps—and pull the surprises—the team hoped for when it drafted the Heisman Trophy winner.

In short: It can be like it was in 2006, only better. “A lot of things are still up in the air, but I hope so,” Bush says. “(The coaches) definitely know I want to be back there returning punts and being involved as much as I can in the offense.” —Steve Greenberg

Bush fell well short of expectations in '07, but don't be surprised if he turns the corner this year.

Saturday nights.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I really tried to stay out of trouble and focus on what was important. I enjoyed school. One of the things I look back on is if I could go back and do it again, I would do it the same way. I wouldn't try to go back and have more fun or anything. But I left school early, and I still want to graduate. I'm going to try to do that shortly.

SN: Mario Williams: 6-7, nearly 300 pounds, strong, fast—and a nerd?

WILLIAMS: I wasn't a nerd, now. I wouldn't go that far.

SN: Who would you have drafted—Mario Williams or Reggie Bush?

WILLIAMS: Myself, of course. Just because of myself. I'm not going to sit here and say one or the other was better, because we played two totally different positions. No matter what choice was made, we all as men had to live with it.

SN: Have you shaken that feeling that you have something extra to prove because you were picked first?

WILLIAMS: I don't have to prove anything to anybody.

SN: What do you do for fun?

WILLIAMS: I might play video games, Xbox, PlayStation, hang out. I've got some dogs.

SN: Poodles?

WILLIAMS: Pit bulls. Three of them: Zeus, Bishop and Kane.

SN: Are you single? Engaged? Secretly married?

WILLIAMS: Definitely not engaged. Definitely not that. I've got a couple years until that happens. Right now, I'm trying to find the right person. I've been through some things, the type of things that people look at as probably me doing this or that, but I look at it as the opposite—it was the girls



Williams always had the get up and go to run down the quickest quarterbacks—and after his sweet '07, he has burgeoning confidence to boot.

doing this or that.

SN: You're speaking in code. Have you had your heart broken?

WILLIAMS: No, they can't do that. I'm Superman. But I recently had a bad experience, I guess you could call it.

SN: What do you drive?

WILLIAMS: I have a Ford GT, a sports car—not the Mustang. A lot of people, when you tell them Ford GT, they think it's a Mustang, but it's not. And I have a truck I love—a Ford F-250. I'm a country boy.

SN: What's your most prized possession?

WILLIAMS: I'd probably say my dogs. It might sound funny, but you really get attached. You know how people get with their pets. I love my dogs to death. They're like my kids.

SN: Who are your best friends in football?

WILLIAMS: Everybody that's on the D-line here in Houston. I have a lot of best friends, but I would definitely say my D-line teammates. And probably Tank Tyler from the Kansas City Chiefs.

SN: Who are you, in a nutshell?

WILLIAMS: I'm very self-kept and quiet. I don't like going out and being the center of attention.

I'm not one of those guys trying to be in the spotlight, in the middle of a club. I try and lay low.

SN: Do you have a prediction for the Texans this season?

WILLIAMS: I feel like the last couple of years that I've been here, we've always had some games that definitely could have gone the other way. Last year, we managed to get a couple of those, but we also let some get away.

SN: How is that a prediction?

WILLIAMS: I don't know. Winning the division, the Super Bowl—those are things we have to decide. We have to just do it. **SN**

A brand-new start of it

Brett Lorenzo Favre's last moments in Green Bay were carried live on television. But it was not the end anyone could have predicted. Instead of shivering on a snow-covered football field, he stood on a sun-soaked tarmac. Instead of carrying his helmet, he carried luggage out of a dark-red Escalade and onto a waiting plane. As breathless news anchors described the action, the plane took off into the early-afternoon sky.

And thus ended arguably the most successful run any quarterback has ever had on any team.

It was a complex, confusing, confounding climax to the most unbelievable soap opera in NFL history. And it wasn't even over. Favre would fly first to Mississippi and later to New York as he was traded in the biggest deal in Jets and Packers history. The biggest deal in sports history, if you listened too long to too many commentators.

Yes, the aw-shucksiest, down-homeist, countriest boy to ever gunsling the pigskin would be playing in the bright lights and big city in the Big Apple. Favre and Green Bay were a perfect match. Favre and New York ... not so much. If a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle, Favre needs New York like a deer needs a subway. Even Favre seemed cognizant of this. "To a certain degree, I don't really know what I've gotten myself into," he said.

And thus began the most anticipated run any quarterback has ever had on any team. At least it seems that way so far.

At a press conference on March 6, Favre cried while announcing his retirement from the Packers after 16 seasons. In a style that has endeared him to fans and the media, he was bluntly honest in saying he was too mentally drained to play. In a matter of weeks, he had changed his mind and decided to return to the NFL, but the Packers, like a jilted lover, had moved on. The fight was ugly, the breakup was unseemly, Packers coach Mike McCarthy publicly questioned whether Favre really wanted to play. And the Jets wondered, before acquiring him, whether he would agree to

play for them.

Should a guy who a few short months ago was too mentally drained to play in Green Bay now play in New York City, the most mentally draining place in the country? Favre and the Jets both say he can handle it. Other athletes who have moved to New York and veterans of the New York sports scene believe Favre will make the adjustment. But those people also say it won't be easy. "The scrutiny there is going to be tenfold what he went through in Green Bay," says Kerry Collins, the former Giants quarterback who now backs up Vince Young in Tennessee.

Favre is going from the smallest market in the NFL to the largest. But the difference is in the number of fans in the markets, not the degree of their passion, says former Jets coach Al Groh, now the coach at the University of Virginia. "New York's got a bigger zoo and more restaurants, but the passion for professional football is very similar in each place," he says.

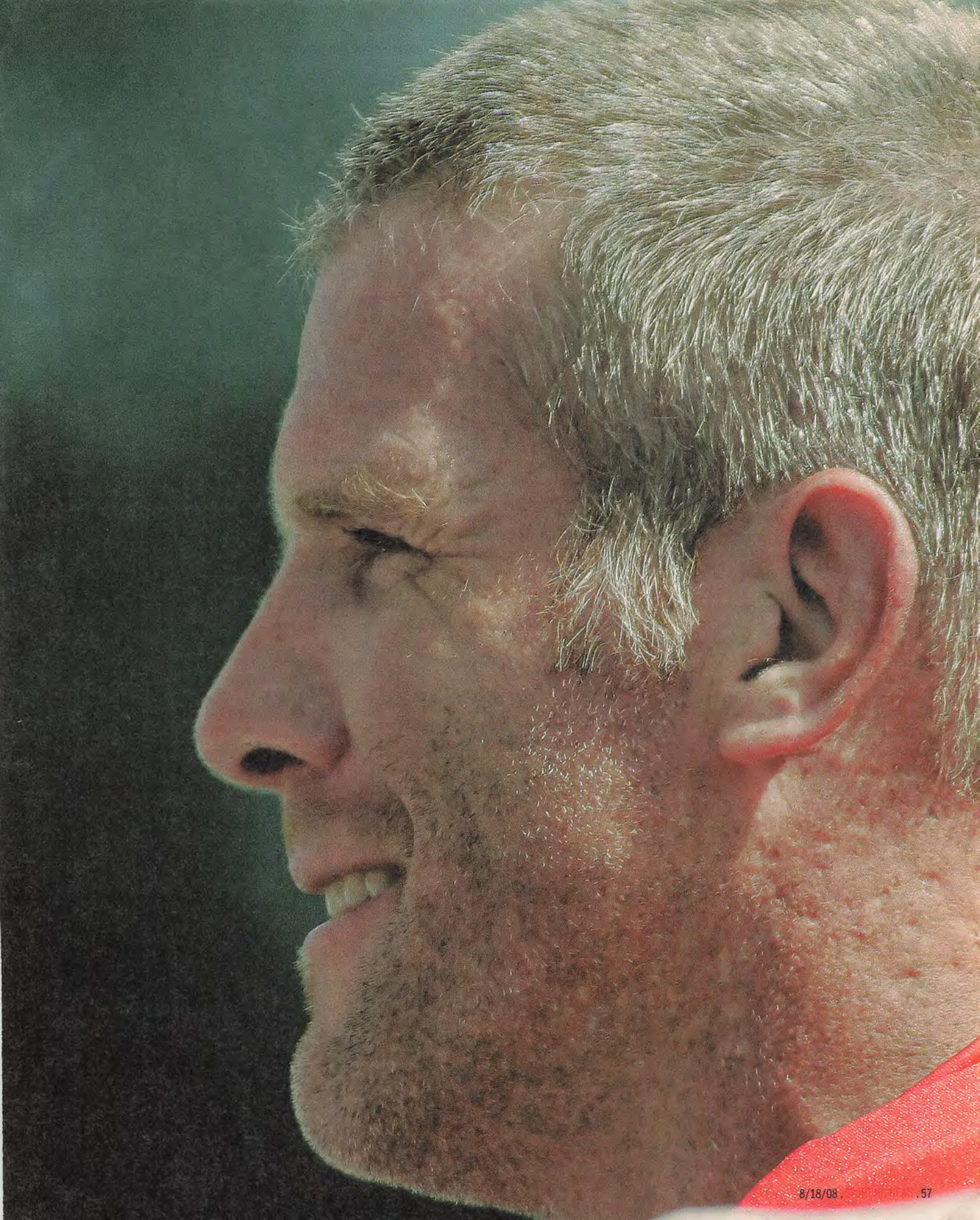
That might be giving Jets fans too much credit. Packer Nation makes most fans seem namby-pamby about their teams. Judging by vanity plates at Lambeau Field and around Green Bay last week, Packers fans are way more passionate than Jets fans. Plus, they wear cheese! And then there's this old joke: A man with season tickets at Lambeau Field shows up for Week 1. The seat next to him, usually occupied by his wife, remains empty. Neighboring fans ask where she is. He explains she died in the offseason. They offer condolences and ask why he couldn't bring a friend or relative to the game—after all, the waiting list for season tickets has more than 70,000 names on it. "I would have," the man replies, "but they are all at her funeral."

The point being, as the (former) center of the universe on a team that is the center of the entire state of Wisconsin's sports universe, Favre is accus-

The mental demands of playing in New York will be intense for a player who said he was spent five months ago, but—as always—**Brett Favre** seems ready to improvise
By Matt Crossman



Favre knows the zoo is bigger in New York—in more ways than one.



tomed to attention. "In Green Bay, every single person, kid, child, man, woman knew who he was no matter where he went," says Panthers linebacker Na'il Diggs, a teammate of Favre's for six years in Green Bay. "In New York, you might find a couple people that might not recognize him. He might be able to slide through the radar a little better with more people and crowds."

So let's stipulate that Brett Favre is ready for New York. Is New York ready for Brett Favre? Jets coach Eric Mangini is a control freak; Favre draws up plays in the sand. Already, Mangini has said he'll change his offense to suit Favre's gunslingerliness. "Brett does some things on instinct. And you don't want to coach him out of a good play," Mangini says.

The Jets' offense is similar to the Packers', so the transition from an X's and O's standpoint won't be drastic. But that doesn't mean there won't be struggles. "When you get a new quarterback in, getting him on the same page with terminology is the biggest challenge," says Chargers coach Norv Turner.

In Green Bay, for example, when the quarterback takes a knee to run out the clock, the play is called Church (because he gets on his knees.) Whatever the Jets call it, Favre will think *Church* and then translate it, and eventually, he'll just think of the new word.

Just as Favre must get used to the new language, the Jets must get used to his risk-taking. It will be interesting to see how Mangini and Jets fans react when Favre starts overgunslinging.

"Everything that happens here gets magnified more than anywhere else in the world," says Mets first baseman Carlos Delgado. "You are in the spotlight all the time, so you have very little room for mistakes."

Favre will eventually throw a ridiculous game-losing, playing-like-a-kid-is-charming-except-when-he-never-learns-from-his-mistakes-type interception, and New York's tabloid headline writers will salivate at the prospects.

He'll get Favrecued.

"I think the only situation that's going to be tough is if he doesn't come out and play at a high level," says Cardinals quarterback Kurt Warner, who played one year with the Giants after being released by the Rams in 2004. "He's never dealt with that kind of scrutiny. I'm not sure New York and the media will be as kind if he goes out and isn't playing at that kind of level."

Favre brings with him a Super Bowl championship and an appearance in another, which combined with \$5 would get him a latte at Starbucks—if country boys drank that froufrou stuff. Success in a small market does not always portend success in New York, especially considering New York defines success as winning a championship. Alex Rodriguez arrived in the Bronx as the best player in baseball. He still is, but he choked on the Big Apple.



For Favre's arrival, the mayor put on a show—and an extra helping of pressure for good measure.

"In some ways, it's like A-Rod coming to the Yankees, but there is a big difference," says Joe Torre, the former Yankees manager who now manages the Dodgers, about Favre's arrival in New York. "Everyone keeps pushing on the fact Alex has never won a World Series. Favre has won a Super Bowl and been in another one. And he has such a colorful personality, perfect for New York. Alex is a spectacular player, spectacular. But all the color (Favre) brings to the game makes it different."

Favre's straw-in-his-mouth personality—who

doesn't love The Gunslinger?—will draw loads of attention. And as he showed with his speed-dial connection to ESPN in recent weeks, he isn't afraid to use the media to promote his agenda. "He knows he's not just another player," says Pedro Martinez, who joined the Mets at the tail end of his Hall of Fame career. "He may want to be under the radar, but that is going to be impossible in New York with all the media attention. He understands what he has to do. He's been No. 1 for so many years, he knows exactly what his responsibilities are. I have no doubt he knows what he's facing."

If it doesn't make you—it'll break you

Brett Favre joins an intriguing list of stars who have jumped into the New York cauldron:

Wayne Gretzky. Pre-NYC: The best player in the history of the NHL. **Today:** The best player in the history of the NHL.

Reggie Jackson. Pre-NYC: A star who had won three World Series titles, an MVP award and a World Series MVP. **Today:** Known as Mr. October, a postseason legend.

Stephen Marbury. Pre-NYC: An All-Star who was supposed to save his hometown team. **Today:** A nonstar whose embarrassing tenure with the Knicks—on and off the court—will end when the team eventually buys him out or trades him.

Alex Rodriguez. Pre-NYC: The best player in baseball ... but a postseason choker and alleged adulterer whose reputation has been destroyed.

Isiah Thomas. Pre-NYC: A Hall of Fame player with a rocky post-playing career as an executive and a coach. **Today:** A former Knicks president and coach—the guy who comes to mind first when you think of how terrible that team is. —Matt Crossman

Surely Favre was the first Packer ever to fly away from the team on live television. His arrival in New York was unique, too—he attended a press event with Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Hizzoner gave Favre a key ring with a promise to add a key to the city if Favre wins the Super Bowl, thus adding absurd expectations to the pressure, scrutiny and challenges Favre faces.

"He's being looked at as the savior," says Packers president Mark Murphy. "It will be much different for him as compared to what he is leaving in Green Bay. It will be very fun to watch. Nothing would surprise me. I expect that he'll do well there, and we wish him the best."

Those are kind parting words considering how acrimonious and public the breakup was. The media coverage was exhaustive and exhausting, and the all-Favre, all-the-time news cycle shows no sign of ending now that he's in the media capital of the world. "The attention I've gotten since I've been here has been overwhelming," Favre says.

And that was before he had even practiced with his new team. **SN**

Contributing: Albert Breer, Bill Eichenberger, Darin Gantt, Mark Kass, John Rawlings, Kent Somers and Jim Wyatt.

Q&A

T.J. Houshmandzadeh
Bengals WR

He's no No. 2

It would be unfair to call T.J. Houshmandzadeh the Bengals' second option at receiver after Chad Johnson. After all, Houshmandzadeh, a seventh-round steal in 2001, has racked up more TD catches (28) than Johnson (24) the past three seasons. In '07, Houshmandzadeh's 112 receptions tied him with the Patriots' Wes Welker for the most in the league and helped earn him his first Pro Bowl trip.

SN: You scored 10 touchdowns in the Bengals' first eight games last season. Is there a secret to getting open at the right time in the end zone?

HOUSHMANDZADEH: I have been taught for a long time on how to play wide receiver, so after a while it becomes part of your natural abilities. You play the position to your strengths. You start to know the defense and where you can use your body to your advantage when things get tight.

SN: You're coming off a great season, but what do you still need to work on?

HOUSHMANDZADEH: You can always improve. I don't look at one particular thing I need to work on. I just try to improve my game all-around. If you're a good athlete, you're able to multi-task. I don't think you can ever perfect anything. I work on everything—route running, catching the ball, my quickness, my understanding of the game.

SN: When you go to three wide receivers, how will it be different without Chris Henry?

HOUSHMANDZADEH: We've got a smaller guy in Antonio Chatman (5-9, 183), a more classic slot

'It doesn't happen often, but when we're going no-huddle, sometimes I just give him this look and he knows what to do.'

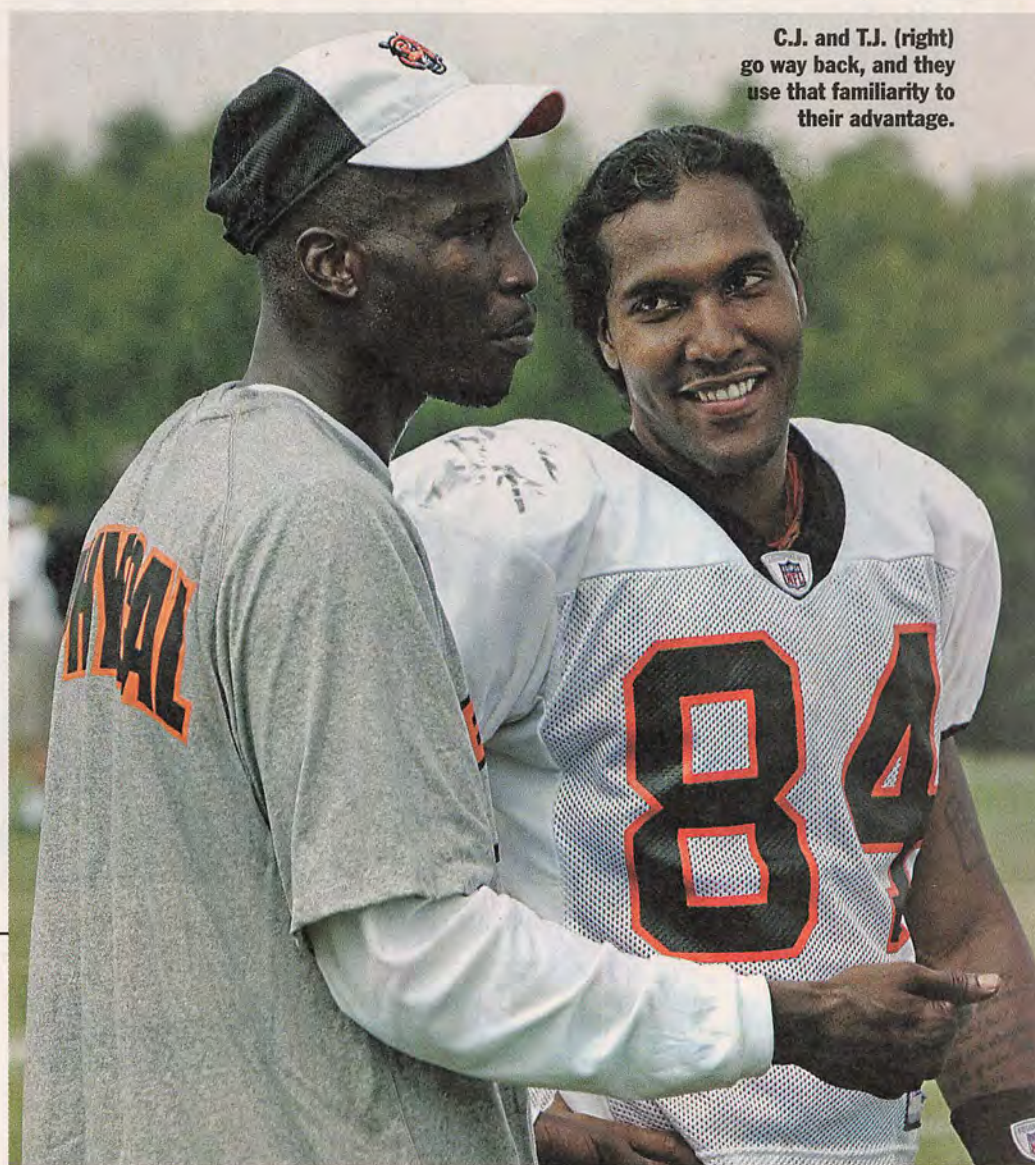
—T.J. Houshmandzadeh on his on-field communication with Chad Johnson

guy who's quick and fast. That will enable both Chad and me to slide to the outside more in those sets.

SN: What do you and Chad talk about on the field?

HOUSHMANDZADEH: It's more about critiquing each other. *How does this route look? How does that route look? What could have I done better on this one? What could you have done better on this one?* That's pretty much how we do it. It's either: 'Why did you do it this way?' or 'I would have done it exactly how you did it—that was cool.'

SN: Are you at a point where you can communicate nonverbally?



C.J. and T.J. (right) go way back, and they use that familiarity to their advantage.

HOUSHMANDZADEH: It doesn't happen often, but when we're going no-huddle, sometimes I just give him this look and he knows what to do. It's weird, and we've been doing it since college (when both were wide receivers at Oregon State). It's nothing with hands or signals to tip off the defense but just a look. And it's just with Chad. It's the kind of look that says "you dumbass" or "you've got this" for a play or a route.

SN: You seem to like being involved as an offensive mentor even when you're not on the field.

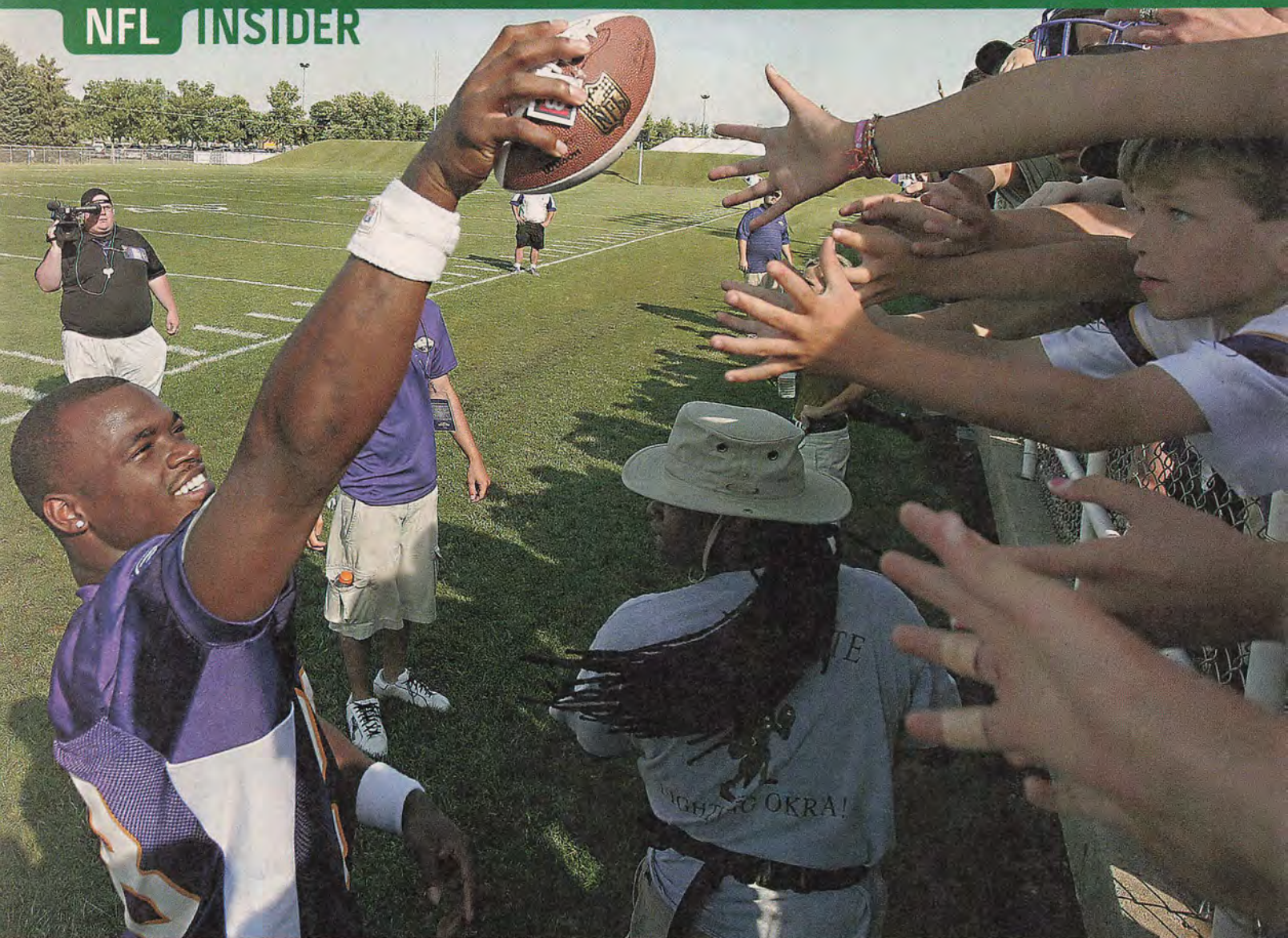
HOUSHMANDZADEH: When you're not practicing, you've got to do something. I like to help people because I got a lot of help along the way.

SN: Somewhere down the line, do you see yourself as a coordinator or a coach?

HOUSHMANDZADEH: I want to coach because I feel I know a lot and I can teach people, but you also know how much time coaches spend on it. I think I know talent, so I really want to get in a position where I can do something in the front office. Scouting—that's too easy. I need to be like the decision maker or maybe just one of them.

SN: So where are the Bengals as a team with all that's gone on during the offseason?

HOUSHMANDZADEH: Everything is fine, and everyone here can thank Brett Favre for taking the attention off of us. —Vinnie Iyer



You know you've made it when a defensive coordinator says this about you:

'He's a freakin' beast'

By Dennis Dillon

ddillon@sportingnews.com

When you ask coordinators or players about defending Adrian Peterson, they break into footballspeak. They throw out terms such as *eight men in the box*, *gap control* and *gang tackling*. It's easy to talk the talk but difficult to walk the walk.

As a rookie with the Vikings last season, Peterson rushed 238 times for 1,341 yards—second only to LaDainian Tomlinson, who had 77 more carries than Peterson but only 133 more yards. Peterson eclipsed 100 yards in a game six times, including in a 224-yard effort against the Bears

and a 296-yard explosion against Tomlinson's Chargers that broke the NFL single-game record.

Peterson has made a big impression on players, coaches and league personnel. In a recent *Sporting News* poll of eight scouts, one from each division, he was picked as the second-best running back in the NFL behind only L.T.

"He's a freakin' beast," Lions defensive coordinator Joe Barry says.

So how *can* you stop Peterson?

Sneak an interloper into Minnesota's locker room before a game, find Peterson's locker and switch his shoes.

Vikings fans know who the franchise is. If Peterson can avoid injury, 2,000 yards aren't out of the question.

Peterson breaks out a new pair of cleats for every game, a ritual he has been following since he played at Oklahoma. "I don't like my shoes loose," he says. "I like my feet to be snug in my shoes."

Getting past security would be challenging, but it couldn't be any more difficult than trying to stop Peterson on the field.

"He can run through you, he can run around you, and he can run away from you," says Packers outside linebacker A.J. Hawk.

The 6-1, 217-pound Peterson has all the attributes of a great running back: size, speed and strength. But the trait that seems to separate him is



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his keen eyesight.

"He's strong and fast, but the biggest thing is his vision is advanced," says Packers middle linebacker Nick Barnett. "He knows where his hole is going to be before it is there. He sees it developing as he's running."

One thing Peterson couldn't see in advance last season was a knee injury during a November 11 game against Green Bay. He suffered a torn lateral collateral ligament, which forced him out of that game and sidelined him the next two weeks.

When he returned on December 2 for a home game against the Lions, he wore a big, bulky brace around his right knee. During pregame warmups, Barry eyeballed the brace and started feeling confident. *He probably won't be as elusive or be able to cut like he normally could*, Barry thought to himself.

Three hours later, by the end of the Vikings' 42-10 victory, Peterson had rushed 15 times for 116 yards and two touchdowns. So much for the

'He can run through you, he can run around you, and he can run away from you.'

—Packers linebacker A.J. Hawk on Adrian Peterson

He's not a pain only when he's in pain

The only thing that kept Adrian Peterson from winning the league rushing title last year was an injury. Through eight games, he was on pace for 2,072 yards, which would have been the most ever by a rookie and second-most in history. Then he tore a knee ligament against Green Bay in Week 10. He wasn't the same after that.

	G	Att.	Yds.	Avg.	TDs	100-yard games
Before the injury	9	169	1,081	6.4	8	5
After the injury	5	69	260	3.8	4	1

big, bulky brace.

Putting an eighth defender in the box, usually a safety, is a routine antidote for a powerful running game. The theory is the defense has one more player than an offense can block.

"If you're relying on that eighth guy to stop Adrian Peterson, that's not going to work," Barry says. "If he makes your free hitter miss, he can take it to the house."

"When you defend a back like that, you've got to get multiple hats on the ball. Everybody has to be conscious of getting off the snap, getting off blocks, sprinting to the ball and gang-tackling this guy."

Opponents finally started using unconventional strategy to slow down Peterson late in the season. San Francisco tried forcing him to run to the outside, where it sent cornerbacks and safeties on run blitzes. "To keep bouncing him outside, where he didn't have room to run, was the ticket," says 49ers defensive coordinator Greg Manusky.

Peterson finished that game with 14 attempts for 3 yards. He lost yards or gained no yards on eight carries, and his longest run was 4 yards (a 21-yard gain was nullified by a holding penalty). Defensive backs tackled Peterson five times.

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Two weeks later, the Redskins employed an aggressive scheme. At times, they used five linemen to control the line of scrimmage. At other times, they used four linebackers and only three defensive backs. They held Peterson to 27 yards on nine carries.

"A guy like that forces you to be creative and come up with things like that," says Barry. "He's a pain in the butt to deal with."

The knee has not been an issue at camp for Peterson, who has been exercising patience. After studying tape of the 49ers game, he noticed that if he had waited a little longer and allowed his blockers time to do their jobs, he might have been able to break a few runs of 10 or 15 yards.

If Peterson were an opposing coach, what plan would he come up with to stop himself?

"I can't tell you that, man," he says, laughing. "I've got to keep that top-secret."

Peterson won't put himself in a defensive coordinator's shoes. He's more comfortable in a tight new pair of his own.

SN

Our stable of NFL writers has you covered all summer. This week, we're camping with the Falcons, Bills, Steelers, Dolphins and Browns. Get live reports at sportingnews.com.

speedreads

If there's one team that will benefit from the suspensions of Steve Smith and Brandon Marshall, it's the Chargers. When San Diego opens at home against the Panthers, it won't have to worry about Smith, Carolina's biggest playmaker. When the Chargers visit Denver in Week 2, they won't have to defend Marshall. Talk about a double dose of good fortune.

It's hard to believe the Packers will go into the regular season with two rookies backing up Aaron Rodgers, who has never started an NFL game himself. Look for Green Bay to add a veteran quarterback in the coming weeks.

It's almost a crime NFL teams charge fans regular-season prices for tickets to preseason games. It's like being asked to pay regular admission price to a Broadway show and then watching cast tryouts and rehearsals.



INSIDE DISH

One of the biggest differences in the Chiefs' offense under new coordinator **Chan Gailey** is the quarterbacks will be able to audible. If, for example, **Brodie Croyle** sees an alignment that likely will stop a called running play, he can audible to a running play to the defense's weak side. That wasn't an option under Gailey's predecessors, **Al Saunders** (2001-06) and **Mike Solari** (2007), who thought the Chiefs could shift or motion their way out of a bad spot. But opponents could simply wait out the shift or motion and reset their defense. ➤ Chargers fans should keep an eye on second-year ILB **Anthony Waters** during the preseason. A third-round pick in 2007, Waters would have been drafted higher had he not suffered a serious knee injury early in his senior season at Clemson. Waters was inactive for every game as a rookie but brings size (6-3, 238) and athleticism. With starter **Stephen Cooper** suspended for the first four games, Waters is battling **Derek Smith** for the early-season job. Once Cooper is back, Waters

The Chiefs have a new coordinator—and that means Croyle will be talking a whole lot more this season.

could eventually overtake **Matt Wilhelm** at the other inside linebacker spot. ➤ The 49ers are optimistic free-agent addition **Bryant Johnson** will flourish with chances he didn't get behind WRs **Anquan Boldin** and **Larry Fitzgerald** in Arizona. Though he never lived up to his first-round billing, Johnson grew into a steady No. 3 for the Cardinals and, at 6-3, 216 pounds, has the tools to be more than that. ➤ Cowboys S **Courtney Brown**, a seventh-round pick in 2007, has emerged as a contributor in the team's substitution packages and could take Pro Bowler **Roy Williams'** spot on the field in certain situations soon. Brown can run in the 4.3s—outstanding speed for a safety—and has put some weight on his wiry 6-1 frame. ➤ QB **Drew Stanton** may soon be ready to compete with **Jon Kitna** for the starting job in Detroit. With new coordinator **Jim Colletto** calling plays, Stanton is in a better position to challenge Kitna than he would've been had **Mike Martz** returned in the role. ➤ By signing **Chad Pennington** as their starter, the Dolphins won't have to rush **Chad Henne**, their future at quarterback. And there's a bonus: Pennington is a strong leader who will be a good role model for Henne. —*Albert Breer*

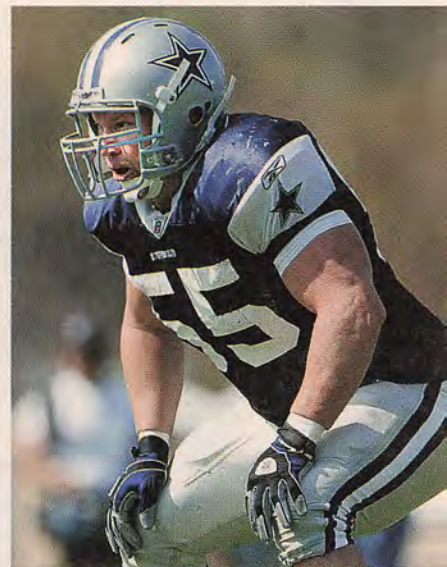
Free-agent pickups who are off to a good start ...

■ Linebacker **Zach Thomas** is doing all the little things that made the Cowboys covet him. He's making plays behind the line and getting to the point of attack before he can be blocked. He also has done a good job of taking on blockers, something new for him as an inside linebacker in the 3-4. He has been aggressive and is showing no signs of the concussion symptoms that affected him last year in Miami.

■ Nose tackle **Jason Ferguson** has allowed the Dolphins to accelerate their evolution to a 3-4 scheme. In practice, he has caused consistent problems for the offense with his size (6-3, 310) and aggressiveness. He also is emerging as a leader for young players such as second-year nose tackle **Paul Soliai**, whose improvement is partly the result of Ferguson's influence.

■ **Ben Utecht** is making an impact as a receiver and blocker for the Bengals. The tight end is working with quarterback **Carson Palmer** after almost every practice, and the two are forming a close bond. Utecht is a physical blocker who is working in concert with the line. Best of all, he's showing the ability to make tough catches in traffic. It will take him a while to learn the fullback position, a must for a tight end in the team's multifaceted scheme.

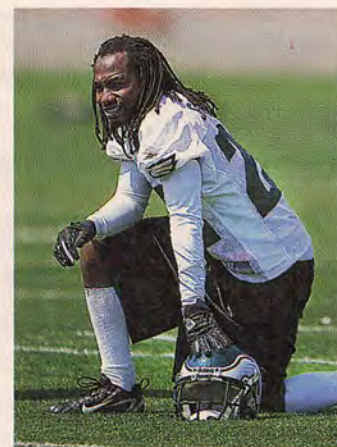
■ Center **Jeff Faine** is proving to be a perfect fit in the interior of the Buccaneers' line. He's very aggressive, and the coaches have been impressed with his ability to get to the second level and deliver a block with some pop. He's also a solid pass protector who sets up quickly. The team believes the interior line, with guards **Arron Sears** and **Davin Joseph**, is one of its strengths.



You'd never know Thomas was playing in a different scheme.

... and one who isn't

■ Injuries have kept Pro Bowl cornerback **Asante Samuel** from getting acclimated to the Eagles' defense. Hamstring pulls caused Samuel to miss almost all of the team's camp and activities so far. The Eagles acquired him in the off-season because he was an interception machine in New England and rarely missed a game—the perfect combo to help an Eagles defense that in 2007 ranked last in the NFL in takeaways and played too many games without oft-injured cornerback **Lito Sheppard**. But Samuel's inability to stay healthy has made the secondary look just like last year's—Sheppard at left corner and **Sheldon Brown** at right. —*SN correspondents*



With Samuel injured, the Eagles are right back where they started.

FOCUS ON: Camp battles

By SN correspondents



If the preseason opener was any indication, Meachem is a keeper as the Saints' No. 3 wideout.

Saints WR **Robert Meachem** made a strong case for the No. 3 job in the preseason opener at Arizona, catching four passes for 129 yards, including a sensational 60-yard catch-and-run touchdown. Meachem (6-2, 210) sat out his rookie season with a knee injury, but he has superior size and speed, and his confidence is growing. Meachem's competition is veteran **Devery Henderson**, a deep threat who has a history of problems with dropped passes. Henderson, who has been battling a hamstring injury, needs to win the job if he wants a roster spot. ... There's no doubt **Adam Jones** will challenge **Anthony Henry** for the Cowboys' right cornerback job. But it hasn't happened yet. Jones is rusty after sitting out 2007 under league suspension and had a tough time in

the preseason opener. Henry, who had a team-high six interceptions last season, does a good job of using his long arms to deflect passes. He has been his usual steady self—technically sound and under control. Jones is more of a gambler. ... Jets CBs **Justin Miller** and **David Barrett** are competing for the starting spot on the right side. Miller is getting the majority of reps, and he started the preseason opener at Cleveland, a sign he has the edge. But he struggled in the past with technique, and he committed a 25-yard pass interference penalty against Browns WR **Braylon Edwards**. ... ILB **Leon Williams** is putting pressure on Browns captain **Andra Davis** for the starting job. Davis is a leader and more consistent; Williams is taller and more athletic. They shared time last season and might



Jackson has the right stuff, but Gaffney (left) has the edge.

Jackson vs. Gaffney: athlete vs. playmaker

The action is heating up between Jabar Gaffney and Chad Jackson for the Patriots' No. 3 wide receiver job. The two couldn't be more different.

Only Randy Moss has better physical skills than Jackson. But Jackson is an undisciplined route-runner who's still developing a rapport with quarterback Tom Brady.

Gaffney isn't as athletic, but he has a knack for getting open and making plays. He doesn't excel in any one area, but his hands are reliable and he's solid across the board.

On paper, Jackson should win easily. But the early edge goes to Gaffney.

do so again. But Davis is fighting for his future and will be motivated to step up after agreeing to a pay cut. Look for him to have a career year behind a much better line. ... Most observers assumed **J.T. O'Sullivan** would be the 49ers' No. 3 quarterback, if he made the roster at all. Now it looks like O'Sullivan has a shot at being the Week 1 starter. **Alex Smith** and **Shaun Hill** are struggling to digest **Mike Martz's** offense, but O'Sullivan—who worked with Martz in Detroit last year—has shown excellent command of the playbook and the quick release that Martz wants. O'Sullivan started the preseason opener and his accuracy was the best of the three, though he had two turnovers. It remains a close competition. ... MLB **Pat Thomas** replaced **Napoleon Harris** as the Chiefs' starter early in camp, so there's time for Harris to win the job back. But Thomas is a good athlete who has a better grasp of what the coaches want, so look for him to stay in the role.

Orton, Grossman are equally unimpressive

The Bears' quarterback competition between Kyle Orton and Rex Grossman heads to Seattle with no clear-cut leader. Orton started the preseason opener against Kansas City and didn't accomplish a lot. Grossman, who will start against the Seahawks Saturday, tossed a touchdown pass to Garrett Wolfe—a 3-yard throw and a 22-yard scamper by the running back. He, too, failed to impress.

The good news is neither fell on his face. The team thinks Grossman offers the higher upside and Orton is the steadier choice. Coaches will continue to hope somebody steps forward and sustains a drive or two.

Orton (left) or Grossman? Let the good times roll ... please!



No matter what you think about Scott Speed—oh, you'll have an opinion soon enough—he can drive a racecar.

Getting his feet, er, toenails, wet

By Bob Pockrass

Are you ready for some speed? Sure, but are you ready for *Scott Speed*? Painted toenails, flashy clothes, loose talk and plenty else that doesn't fit NASCAR, he's coming to a track near you.

And he just might be the next Sprint Cup star.

No doubt you've also heard that Joey Logano, the 18-year-old who won in his third Nationwide Series start, might be the next Cup star. Well, Speed, 25, is the anti-Logano. Logano is destined to be a polished NASCAR talent in the conservative mold of Jeff Gordon or Jimmie Johnson, but he has barely raced in any big-time events. Speed, more likely to dress in and say whatever he feels like on any particular day, already has reached what he considers the pinnacle of racing: Formula One.

Granted, the whole F1 thing didn't work out so well—he was replaced in 2006 after less than two years and finished no higher than ninth in 28 starts—but Speed has competed in some of the world's biggest races and was the first American to

drive in F1 since Michael Andretti in 1993. Hey, it looks good on the resume.

Looks aside, he knows how to race. With four ARCA wins (Kansas, Kentucky, Berlin and Nashville) and a truck win at Dover so far in 2008, it's obvious he can do well in good equipment. His biggest challenge in the future will be giving feedback to his team in the longer Nationwide Series and Cup events.

He'll be accepted on the track as long as he wins. Off the track? That remains to be seen. People say he used to be a little arrogant, a Kyle Busch type, because he knew he had talent. Making it to F1 only boosted his confidence. Now that Speed is back in the United States (he was born in California), he is as loose as they come—but without the ego because making it to Cup never was his dream.

Speed talks about getting pedicures to relax before races (he also had the tips of his toenails painted dark blue, with a hint of purple, before the win at Dover). He dresses more like K-Fed than a racecar driver. He talks about how he wants to race in Sprint Cup but is in absolutely no hurry to get there—he likely won't race in the series full time

until 2010. He seems to be having fun in trucks and ARCA cars.

It's a good thing Speed is driving for Red Bull Racing because he doesn't look at all interested in being molded into the typical company spokesman. Red Bull is all about energy, all about flair, and Speed has both. He gets strange looks in the garage when he wears a bright outfit. And he's just about always listening to tunes with his earbuds in. That's the way he rolls.

Criticize him for being different if you want—he doesn't seem to care. He isn't coming to Sprint Cup to win a popularity contest. He already has a sponsor that loves him.

Speed will bring fresh air to a garage made stuffy and high-strung by the influence of big-money sponsors and the pressure big-time teams put on their drivers.

So what if he gets his toenails painted? As they say in racing: It's just one of them deals. **SN**

Bob Pockrass is an associate editor for *NASCAR Scene*. Read more from Pockrass at scenedaily.com.



Scott Speed: Sounds like a name from *Days of Thunder II*.



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speedreads

Martin Truex may be talking about a long-term deal with Dale Earnhardt Inc., but his one-year extension puts him in position to join buddy Dale Earnhardt Jr. at Hendrick Motorsports in 2010. I bet Mark Martin would consider forgoing his partial schedule in 2010 if Hendrick wanted Truex badly enough.

Nothing against AJ Allmendinger, but if I'm Red Bull Racing, I'm giving Scott Speed a shot in the No. 84 Cup car next year.

If sponsorship woes kept Michael McDowell from returning to Michael Waltrip Racing next year, it wouldn't be the worst thing. Problem is, moving to Petty Enterprises in '09 wouldn't provide him any better platform to succeed.

—Roger Kuznia

Before last Sunday's Sprint Cup race at Watkins Glen, **Joey Logano**, 18, was hanging out near the transporter for the No. 20 Joe Gibbs Racing Toyota, the car he hopes to drive in the Cup Series next year. Logano was noncommittal about reports he will make his Cup debut in a fourth Gibbs car September 6 at Richmond. He is already scheduled to run the Nationwide Series race there the night before. "I think it would be a good start—if we start there," Logano said coyly. "It's the type of track I have a little experience at. I tested there once in a Busch East car. I think it would be cool. If we do that, I'll get both races in. It definitely would be

INSIDE DISH

fun." > **Casey Mears** says he's still talking to several car owners about a possible ride for next season. "Right now, nothing is done," says Mears, who will leave the No. 5 Hendrick Motorsports Chevrolet at the end of the season to make room for new hire **Mark Martin**. "(I'm) still talking to a couple of different teams. There are teams that have room for growth and a lot of potential for the future. There are teams that are ready to go right now." Mears has been mentioned as a leading candidate for Richard Childress Racing's fourth car. Petty Enterprises also has expressed interest in his services.

—Reid Spencer

Truex gives DEI a chance

Dale Earnhardt Inc. received a double dose of good news last weekend at Watkins Glen. First the beleaguered team announced that Martin Truex would continue to drive the No. 1 Chevrolet in 2009. Then Truex finished fifth in Sunday's Sprint Cup race, his third top five of the season.

"It was a lot of fun out there," Truex says. "We charged from 17th, where we started early in the race. For a long time we were one of the best cars on the track. It was great to get another top five. It's been a while coming."

Truex moved up to 16th in the points standings but is trailing 12th-place Matt Kenseth by 209 points with four races to go before the field for the Chase is set. To make the Chase for the second straight season, Truex would need to score top fives in the next four races—and for the drivers ahead of him in points to have catastrophic finishes.

In Truex's favor is his history at the next four tracks. Earlier this season, he finished 17th at this weekend's stop, Michigan; 13th at Bristol; sixth at California; and fifth at Richmond, the final race before the Chase begins.

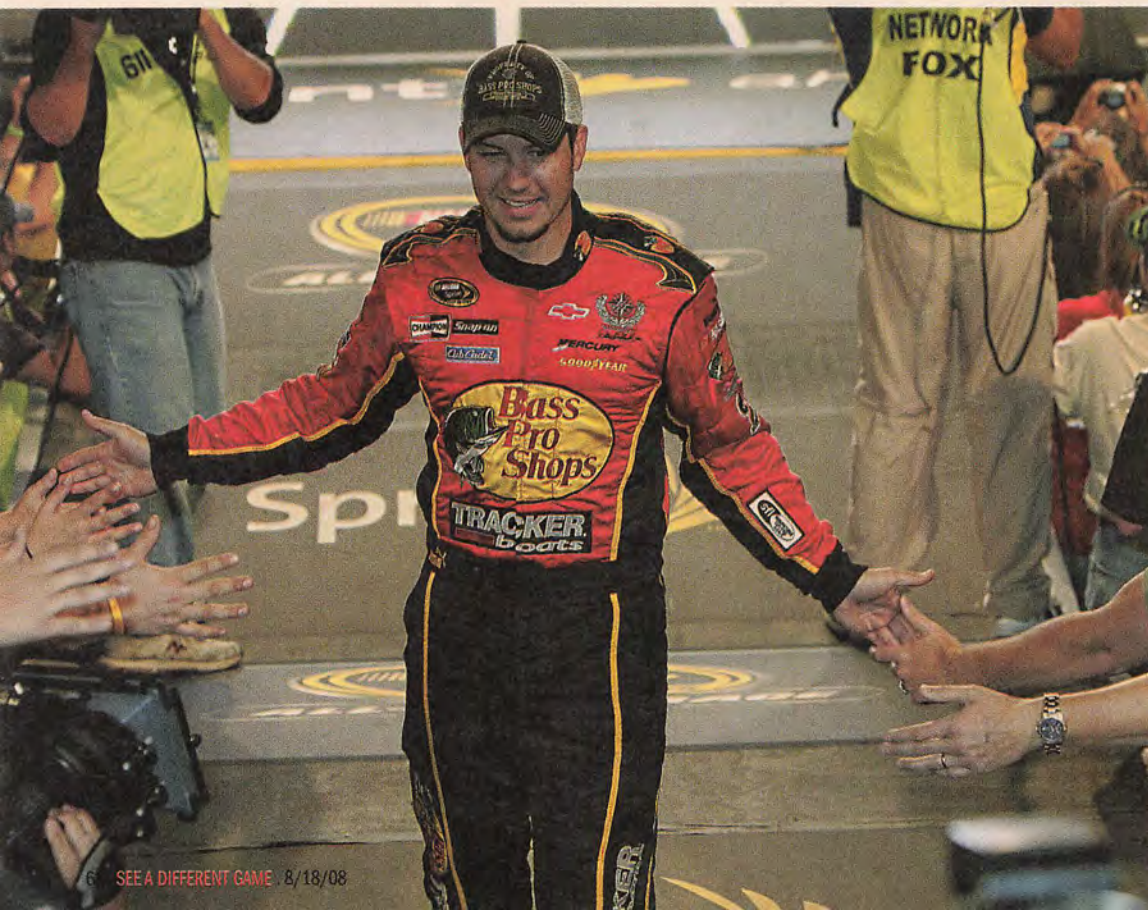
He would be in a much better position had he not suffered a 150-point penalty for a rules violation found during prequalifying inspection for the July Daytona race. That penalty, which included a six-race suspension of crew chief Kevin Manion, fueled speculation Truex would leave DEI.

"It's all about the people," Truex says. "If you don't believe in each other, you might as well go fly a damn kite. You ain't going to get nothing done. At the end of the day, I still believe in the people that are working on my cars, the people that I'm working with on my cars, the people that are getting sponsorship and buying the stuff we need."

"We've got everything we need. Yes, we need to do a better job of utilizing it."

The finish at Watkins Glen was a start. —Bill Marx and Reid Spencer

Truex may be a long shot to make the Chase, but he's the best thing DEI has going.



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Carpentier is one of the most likable guys in motorsports, but that's not the only reason NASCAR would be wise to keep him around.

Breaking up would be wrong to do

Good-guy rookie Patrick Carpentier loves NASCAR. It's a marriage that makes too much sense not to last. *By Reid Spencer*

But NASCAR is the most fun I've ever had racing.

"I just appreciate the moment. We race in front of crowds that are unbelievable. To be able to be a part of the Sprint Cup Series, I feel like a pretty fortunate guy." And NASCAR is fortunate to have someone with such international flair—Carpentier is a native of Joliette, Quebec—who so ardently wants to be in the series. Carpentier, 37, didn't come to stock cars with an

Indianapolis 500 win or a Formula One championship on his resume, but his desire to learn and excel—and his ability to qualify—has kept him in the driver's seat while others in his rookie class with more luminous open-wheel credentials fell by the wayside.

Dario Franchitti's team at Chip Ganassi Racing folded in July because of a lack of sponsorship. Jacques Villeneuve was a nonstarter who exited Cup racing after failing to qualify for the 2008 Daytona 500.

Carpentier, already a pole winner in NASCAR's top two series, will learn soon enough whether he can get the financial backing to keep him in the No. 10 Dodge next season. The wait has been tedious, but he has borne the stress with grace.

"I really hope that it comes out positive," he says. "I think Gillett Evernham is pretty happy. Most of the sponsors that were at our sponsor summit in Montreal were happy. Valvoline, LifeLock, Auto Value. I hope Gillett Evernham is happy as well because I like being here and I like driving this car."

George Gillett, majority owner of GEM, also owns 80 percent interest in the Montreal Canadiens. It would behoove Gillett to keep Carpentier around—if only to avoid being run out of Canada's second-largest city on a rail.

Beyond that, Carpentier is a key to unlocking an unfailingly enthusiastic and largely untapped fan base for NASCAR racing north of the border. Those who saw either of the first two Montreal races also saw the potential for growth.

Beyond that, he's one of the most humble and likable men in motorsports, someone who can represent NASCAR racing to the world.

As much as Carpentier wants to stay in a stock car, NASCAR needs him to be there. **SN**

Patrick Carpentier's stint in limbo—will he or won't he have a full-time ride in 2009?—is supposed to end this week, and it could be the beginning of a mutual success story for the Gillett Evernham Motorsports driver and for NASCAR.

"There are three things that I like," Carpentier said three days after running second to Ron Fellows in the Nationwide Series race August 2 at Circuit Gilles Villeneuve in Montreal. "Formula Atlantic was fun. Grand Am was great to drive.



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Pit Box

NASCAR experts Roger Kuznia and Reid Spencer size up the upcoming race—and each other's analysis—every week in the Pit Box. This week: 3M Performance 400

Who will win at Michigan?

1 p.m. ET Sunday, ESPN

Roger: I love the way Jimmie Johnson has hit his stride again, and I love the fact Michigan is one of seven active tracks where Johnson has yet to win. He has led 136 laps in the past three races here, so I'm expecting him to put it all together on Sunday. In the past three years at MIS, no driver has had more fastest laps (106) than Johnson.

Last week: At Watkins Glen, Kevin Harvick finished sixth for Reid and Jeff Gordon came in 29th for Roger. Kyle Busch won the race and clinched the top seed in the Chase.

Reid: Nice try with J.J., Roger, but Johnson's Chevy won't be a match for Carl Edwards' rocket ship. I don't care how many laps Jimmie has led; in Edwards' past five starts at 2-mile tracks, he has a win and two seventh-place finishes at Michigan and a second-place finish and a victory at Fontana. In other words, he's due.

The Cubs are fulfilling expectations, the White Sox are surpassing them, and a city's baseball fans can dare to dream of putting the 'L' in World Series.

Chicago's summer of baseball love



While the North Siders pile up W's and jack up hopes, the South Siders continue to get a lift from the remarkable Quentin.

By Ryan Fagan

rfagan@sportingnews.com

Question: What's black and blue and red all over?

Chicago, during the baseball-loving summer. The Red Line slices through the heart of this great American city, connecting black-clad White Sox fans on the South Side with Cubs supporters adorned in blue on the North Side. The elevated train's 35th Street stop is steps from U.S. Cellular Field, and the Addison station is a Derrek Lee line drive from the Wrigley Field ivy. The stations are 29 minutes—and worlds—apart.

Somewhere in the middle, the cheering sections mix, mingle and trade taunts. Now, these aren't Al Capone-type territorial disputes, but there is little love lost between the fan bases. A thriving novelty T-shirt business tells only part of the story. In one train car: "Friends don't let friends be Cubs fans," and in the other, one that, well, says the Sox, um, stink. Only, more colorfully.

This summer of 2008 in Chicago is special. The quality of baseball in the Windy City is as good, or maybe better, than ever. Everyone, not just the fans, notices. "You pay attention to them, too," White Sox ace Mark Buehrle says of the Cubs. "Even though I play baseball, I'm still a baseball fan and still watch what everybody else is doing

and read the papers. For Cubs fans and Sox fans, it's fun to be here."

The possibility of an all-Chicago World Series? Yeah, folks here have thought about it a time or 10. But neither team is counting chickens just yet.

The Cubs, on one hand, have fulfilled every one of the sky-high expectations—so far—this year, having clearly established themselves as the best team in the National League and favorites to win the World Series. Perhaps you've heard they haven't done that in quite some time.

The Cubs entered the week four games ahead of the wild-card-leading Brewers, six in front of the Cardinals and a century removed from their last World Series victory. "I think the fact that the Cubs have played to expectations while the Cardinals have been ravaged by injuries and the fact that the Brewers are a very talented but inconsistent team prone to streaks has really put the Cubs where they are right now," a major league scout says.

Down South, not much was expected from the White Sox. Outside of their clubhouse, that is. They've spent most of the season atop the A.L. Central and entered the week neck and neck with the Twins, another surprise this season. "I will take being a half-game out," Sox manager Ozzie Guillen says. "That's better than where everybody thought we'd be, 25 games below .500."

The White Sox returned largely the same team that finished with 72 wins last year. They entered

this week with 64. Left fielder Carlos Quentin, picked up in a trade with the Diamondbacks after an injury-plagued 2007 season, has been better than anyone expected, "the biggest difference-maker on this team," the scout says. Quentin is leading the A.L. in homers with 31 and has 88 RBIs. "I thought he could be a 30-home run guy," Sox general manager Ken Williams says, "just not by August."

And then there are the impressive performances by young starters Gavin Floyd (3.66 ERA) and John Danks (3.21). The rotation has been durable—five pitchers with at least 20 starts—but was dealt a blow when Jose Contreras was knocked out for the rest of the season with a ruptured left Achilles. "He was on his way back to where he needed to be," White Sox catcher A.J. Pierzynski says. "That's what's so disappointing. His velocity was up, and he had his splitter working."

Losing Contreras won't help the Sox shake the Twins, who have been hanging near the top of the A.L. Central since a 10-game winning streak in late June.

"It's going to come down to the end," Buehrle says. "Coming into the season, everybody knew it was going to be a close race, but I don't think anybody knew it was going to be Minnesota—they thought it was between Cleveland and Detroit. But like I say, that's why we play these games. Strange things happen."

SN

For the first time in a while, there's a bit of hope for the Cardinals' beleaguered bullpen. Rookie RHP **Chris Perez** has looked good since returning from Class AAA Memphis—he's flashing a 96-mph fastball and attacking hitters. And it looks like RHP **Adam Wainwright**, the closer during St. Louis' unlikely run to the 2006 World Series title, will work his way back to full strength in the bullpen. He was the team's best starter in 2007 and again this season—until he injured a finger on his throwing hand in June—but the Cardinals' need is much greater in the bullpen than in the rotation. The team expects Wainwright back in the next couple of weeks. ➤ Speaking of pitchers who have both started and relieved for the Cardinals, RHP **Anthony Reyes** made a solid debut for the Indians last week.

Acquired from St. Louis for a Class AA reliever, Reyes gave up one run in 6½ innings and picked up the victory against the Blue Jays. Reyes is long on talent but couldn't find consistency with the Cardinals. The perception was that a change of scenery would work wonders, and his debut would seem to prove that perception correct. ➤ It has been an up-and-down second half for Rangers All-Star 2B **Ian Kinsler**. He was 1-for-19 in his first five games after the break, then went 10-for-21 in his next five. In the 10 games after that, he hit just .136 with a .356 OPS. Manager **Ron Washington** gave Kinsler the day off last Friday so he could get a mental break. ➤ Struggling Royals RHP **Brian Bannister**, an ardent student of statistics, is struggling in a sabermetric category: BABIP (batting average on balls put in play). When Bannister went 12-9 with a 3.87 ERA last season as a

INSIDE DISH

rookie, his BABIP was .262—well below the norm and an indication that batted balls were finding K.C. defenders' gloves. After 23 starts this season, Bannister was 7-10 with a 5.37 ERA and his BABIP (.314) was well above average. Luck isn't all that hasn't gone Bannister's way. His walks and home runs allowed also are way up. ➤ RHP **Chad Bradford** is one example of the type of impact players still available after the July 31 nonwaiver trade deadline. After a solid summer with the Orioles, Bradford was picked up by the Rays for a player to be named and threw two scoreless innings—the ninth and 10th—in his debut for Tampa Bay to pick up a victory. With his knuckle-scraping delivery, Bradford provides another look out of the Rays' bullpen.

By pounding his 96-mph fastball, Perez is taking some heat off the Cardinals' battered bullpen.



speedreads

Give Carlos Silva a little credit for being smart (signing a four-year, \$48 million contract this offseason) before he was stupid (ripping teammates while he has a 5.93 ERA and a 4-13 record).

Gotta love seeing 37-year-old Rangers lefthander Eddie Guardado doing what he was meant to do—close games on a regular basis—for the first time since 2006.

Barry Bonds wants us to know he's not retired just yet. OK, duly noted.



ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Looking for those last-minute moves to put your fantasy team over the top? It's not too late to sign up for help from our Fantasy Source experts at sportingnews.com.

THE CLOSER



Todd Jones

In an ugly divorce, Manny beat Boston to the punch



After escaping a nasty situation in Boston, Ramirez was pumped up for his early days in L.A.

The fact that Manny Ramirez got his wish and got out of Boston makes me believe the inmates do have some control of the asylum.

It's clear the deal was done under duress because Boston gave up a lot to get the Dodgers to take Manny. The Red Sox will say they're good enough to cover the gap, but it's a big gap. No longer will you pitch to David Ortiz in a key spot, so losing Manny has taken two guys out of the Red Sox's offense.

Boston has a smart front office, so the fact it traded Manny tells you just how big a burden he was. But I understand one of his points.

Manny knew the Red Sox, who held team options on his contract for 2009 and 2010, no longer wanted to pay him. But like every club in such a situation, Boston didn't want to take a P.R. hit from losing a great player.

This is a bad—but almost unavoidable—part of the game. If the club can do it, it will make the player look like he doesn't want to be there. Case in point: Torii Hunter and the Twins last year. As soon as Hunter turned down Minnesota's offer, the contract

numbers were leaked. That way, the Twins could look their fans in the eyes and say, "Hey, we tried." Sorry to pick on the Twins, but the Johan Santana trade was similar. They made him an offer, he said no thanks, and the next thing you know, the terms were leaked. The player looks greedy, and the team takes the high road.

Manny smelled that coming, so he forced Boston's hand and got out the only way he could: airing some dirty laundry. He knew if the Red Sox didn't want to pick up his options, they would start a discreet campaign to turn the city against him. Don't believe me? Ask Nomar Garciaparra. With free agency looming, Nomar was offered a four-year deal by Boston—but wanted more. Next thing you knew, Nomar was panned and then dealt to the Cubs.

I'm not condoning how Manny got out of Boston, but I know clubs don't like players to have leverage. Once a player of Manny's caliber decides he wants an expensive multiyear deal but the club doesn't want to go in that direction, somebody is going down. And that someone is the player.

The week ahead

August 15-17

A new-look rotation

The Marlins plan to start righthanders Josh Johnson, Anibal Sanchez and Chris Volstad at home against the Cubs—which is noteworthy because not one of them was in the rotation until just a few days before the All-Star break. The Marlins have stayed in contention by going 10-3 in the trio's first 13 starts.

The road never ends

Milwaukee could be dragging by the time it reaches Los Angeles to face the Dodgers. This series concludes a stretch in which the Brewers will play 12 of 16 games on the road. Away games have not agreed with Brewers third baseman Bill Hall, who ranks among the league's worst in road average (.182), slugging percentage (.300) and on-base percentage (.265).

August 18-20

Voodoo palace

Who knew Tropicana

Field could be such an intimidating place? The Rays are 45-17 at home going into a series against the A.L. West-leading Angels. Righthanders James Shields and Matt Garza—they've combined for a 13-3 record and a 2.32 ERA at home this season—are scheduled to start in the series.

Oh no—Okajima

Red Sox manager Terry Francona might want to hide reliever Hideki Okajima during the series at Baltimore. The lefthander is 0-3 with a 6.91 ERA in 14 career appearances against the Orioles. And he has been charged with three blown saves against them this season. Okajima is threatening to become the first noncloser to lead the majors in blown saves since LaTroy Hawkins tied for the distinction in 2005.

The long goodbye

After the A's come to the Metrodome for a three-game series, the Twins will embark on a 14-game trip to the West Coast and Toronto. They return home for six games before heading out on a 10-game trip. —Gerry Fraley

SCOUTS VIEWS

Observations and opinions from major league scouts

For starters, Chamberlain's injury could finish off the Yankees



With Chamberlain (left) out, the Yankees are running out of options.

The shoulder tendinitis that landed Joba Chamberlain on the 15-day disabled list last week will have both short- and long-term implications for the righthander—and the Yankees—according to three major league scouts. Chamberlain says he'll be back on the mound by the end of this month, but the scouts, two from American League clubs and one from a National League team, don't think he'll start again this season. They also wonder whether the injury is an indication that Chamberlain is not suited to start.

"His delivery is so violent," one A.L. scout says. "He doesn't do anything easy. The more he throws, the more pressure he puts on that shoulder."

"They're going to have to make a decision. Is it better to have him for a few innings a week out of the bullpen, or do they risk bigger problems by starting him? For me, he should go back to the bullpen."

Says the N.L. scout: "I just hope this isn't a sign of something bad. There's a reason they had those Joba Rules last season. He's got such a good arm, but he's got to learn how to take care of it."

Without Chamberlain, 22, the Yankees are doomed to miss the playoffs for the first time since 1993, the scouts say. Because of injuries and poor performances, the Yankees will get little this season from Phil Hughes, Ian Kennedy and Chamberlain—their heralded trio of young righthanders. And all will be question marks for next season.

"Look at what they're putting out there now," another A.L. scout says. "It's just a bunch of guys. They didn't want to use (Darrell) Rasner anymore. They've had too many injuries."

The injuries include No. 1 starter Chien-Ming Wang, out since mid-June—and perhaps for the remainder of the season—because of a foot injury. The Yankees are so strapped for pitching that they haven't dismissed the possibility of summoning righthander Carl Pavano from the minors. The oft-injured Pavano has pitched only 11½ major league innings since opening day 2006.

"That tells you all you need to know about the Yankees," the first A.L. scout says. "To me, they're not getting there this season."

—Gerry Fraley

TOP5

Shocking home run stats

It's no secret that home runs are down. Entering the week, only four players had busted through the 30-homer plateau. From 1996-2001, a player reached the All-Star break with at least 30 homers 12 times. Ten years ago, four players did it. But just because there are fewer long balls doesn't mean there aren't eye-opening home run numbers.

1 Cincinnati's Adam Dunn has earned a reputation as an all-or-nothing hitter, and he has taken that rep to new heights this season. He has 118 strikeouts and is on pace to bash 40 or more homers for the fifth consecutive season. Homers have accounted for a whopping 37 percent of his hits.

2 Entering the week, the Giants had only one hitter, Aaron Rowand (10), with a double-digit homer total. The fact the team has the fewest homers in the majors isn't shocking given the absence of Barry Bonds. But Rowand hit 27 last season for the Phillies, and Bengie Molina (19) and Randy Winn (14) both were more productive in 2007 for San Francisco.

3 Adrian Gonzalez has hit 24 percent of the Padres' homers this season. What's more surprising: that Gonzalez should set a career high in homers while playing in a pitcher-friendly park for a last-place team or that he is getting any pitches to hit?



4 When he was traded to the Dodgers, **Manny Ramirez** had 20 homers. Los Angeles' other four regular outfielders (Matt Kemp, Andre Ethier, Juan Pierre and Andruw Jones) had combined for 25 at the time Ramirez arrived. The Dodgers are one of six teams—the A's, Nationals, Twins,

Blue Jays and Giants are the others—that have hit fewer homers than the Phillies' trio of Ryan Howard, Chase Utley and Pat Burrell, who have 87 combined.

5 Carlos Quentin—perhaps the best pickup of last offseason—has more than doubled his career homer total from before this season. He hit 14 combined in 2006 and 2007 and has 31 this year. Consequently, the White Sox are the only team that boasts two outfielders (Quentin, Jermaine Dye) with 25-plus homers. —Chris Bahr

Q&A

Andre Ethier
Dodgers OF

Help out, hit 'em out, eat out ... this guy touches all the bases

As manager Joe Torre puts it, the Dodgers didn't necessarily need another outfielder, but they needed another hitter. So they made the deal for Manny Ramirez. As a result, playing time now is at a premium for the team's other four outfielders. That includes 26-year-old Andre Ethier—a community-minded Dodger who is making an impact on and off the field.

SN: It hasn't been the easiest year for the Dodgers, but here you are in the thick of the race with a bit of momentum.

ETHIER: That's what the goal has been the whole year—to make the playoffs and get to the World Series and win it. Sometimes what you assume to be the right product in spring training doesn't turn out to be it and you have to add key parts and key people along the way. They've made a great effort all year long to do that, and, hopefully, we've turned this team into a winner—what it needs to be and what it should be in L.A.

SN: It's easy to look at your team, with the addition of a hitter like Ramirez, and say you're the N.L. West favorite. But the Diamondbacks have spent much of the year in first place. What makes them so dangerous?

ETHIER: They have that pitching that's unbelievable. They have those two front-line starters (Brandon Webb and Dan Haren), and Randy Johnson's really been coming on lately. Everybody knows they have the good pitching; that can carry you a long way. It's a circumstance where we can get more comfortable facing those guys—just from seeing them more—but they're still able to execute and dominate. I think over time, we'll eventually catch up to those three guys, but they're still on the top of their game and it's tough to face a team like that.

SN: You recently went to a downtown L.A. res-

'It's taken me 26 years of my life to figure out my hobbies and what I really enjoy, and that's eating.'

cue mission and grilled Dodger Dogs for the homeless. How did you get involved with that?

ETHIER: I just thought it would be a good thing to hopefully help out a program like that. It happened to work out by chance. After I asked Josh (Rawitch, the Dodgers' vice president of public relations) if there was a community outreach program downtown that I could help out with, the next day he got an e-mail from this organization—the L.A. Union Rescue Mission—asking if we had any volunteers. Or, actually, food from the stadium after the games that could be donated to their program. So, they put two and two together, and I could be the guy who helps them out, goes down there and creates a bond between the Dodgers and that mission.

SN: You have a blog called Dining with 'Dre (diningwithdre.mlblogs.com). What's that



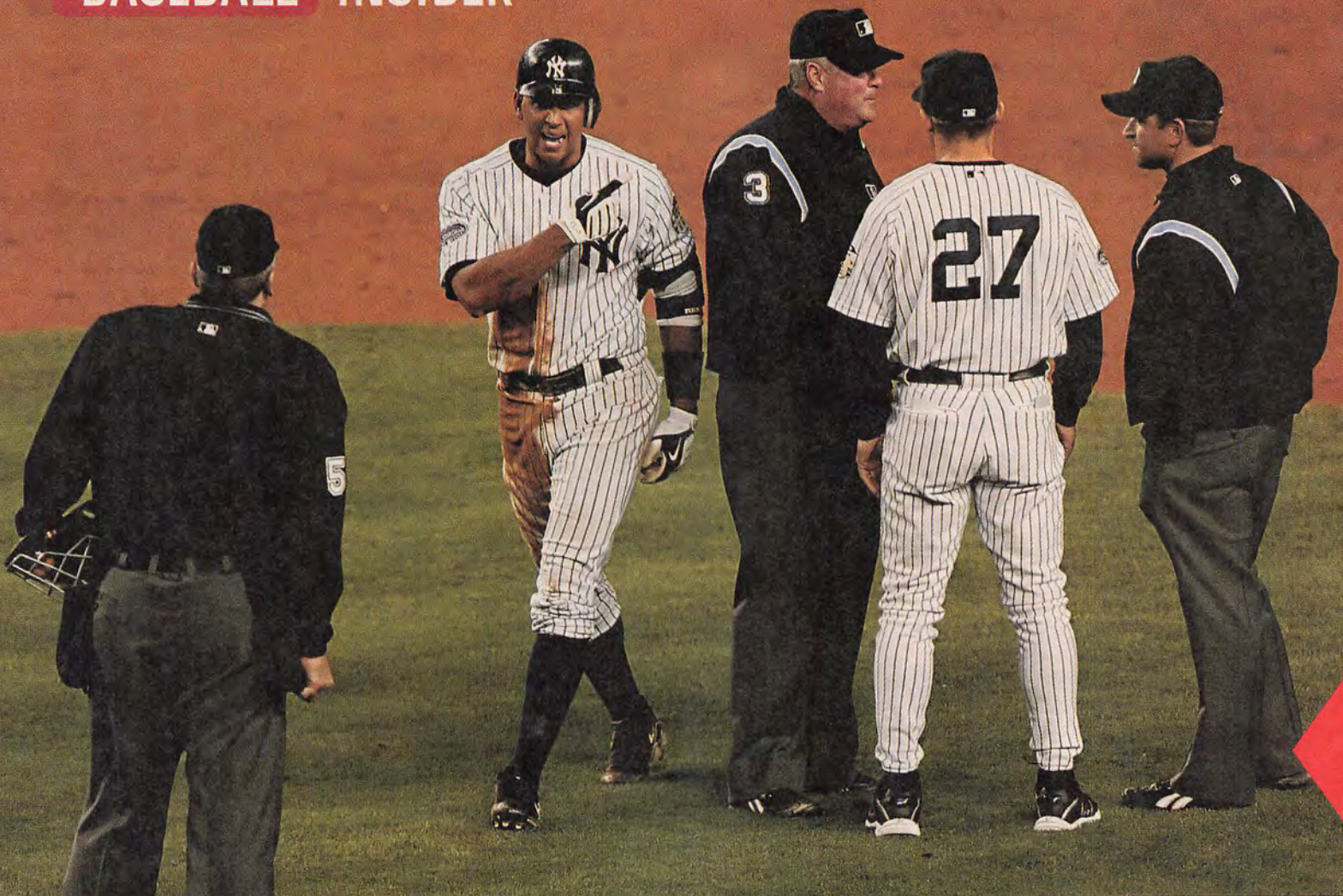
Ethier is a hit in L.A.—both in uniform and in apron.

all about?

ETHIER: It's taken me 26 years of my life to figure out my hobbies and what I really enjoy, and that's eating. Well, it's not really the eating part, just experiencing new cultures and new things through food and what it has to offer. It's kind of morphed into this thing where I visit my favorite ethnic restaurants in L.A. and take pictures and talk about my experiences and what's going through my mind—more than just a general review of the food.

SN: What's your assessment of your performance so far this year?

ETHIER: I don't do that until after the season, and even then it takes a couple of weeks to analyze that. You can't really rate your performance until you see how the team ends up and the way you were able to contribute and help out along the way. You could have a season where you hit .330 and did all these great things, but nothing ever materialized from it and you went home October 1. Or you could hit .260 and have key hits and key plays on defense that help your team get to the playoffs and win the World Series. Once the season ends, whenever that might be—hopefully the end of October—then I'll take a few steps back, relax and analyze what I was able to do, and take the good and go into next season with that. —Ryan Fagan



Upon further review ...

Instant replay didn't arrive on August 1—as was rumored—but it's still on the horizon *By Stan McNeal*

Instant replay is coming to a park near you. Maybe this month, maybe next month, maybe just in time for the playoffs ... but sometime. The commissioner's office has been working with the players association and the umpires union since June, and, according to spokesmen for each group, the main question is not if but when.

It won't work like it does in the NFL, where replays can kill the flow of a last-minute drive. At least, that's not the plan. According to sources in the umpires union, replay use would be limited to calls on home runs—fair or foul, over the fence or not, interfered with by a fan or not.

Don't expect much of an outcry when replay is

implemented, either. Based on interviews with about 20 players, managers and executives, it will be accepted, if not welcomed, across the majors. "We have the technology and ability to get the calls right, so we should," Indians general manager Mark Shapiro says.

When general managers voted last November on whether replay should be used on home run calls, the Brewers' Doug Melvin was one of only five who voted no. Since then, however, Melvin has changed his thinking. "My concern was once you start it, you'll want to add on more," Melvin says. "OK, now we want to do it on first basemen reaching in the stands. Did the fan touch the ball or not? Then, we want to do it to see if the ball hit

the chalk line or not. That was my only reasoning for not putting it in play. If they were to limit it to home run calls, as are the indications, I would be in favor of trying it."

Other concerns and differences of opinion exist, of course. In a game in which the basic rules have gone unchanged for more than a century, no one wants to remove the human element—at least not too much. No one wants a game that is considered slow-moving by some to drag more. And no one—well, almost no one—would like replay used for much more than determining whether home runs really are home runs.

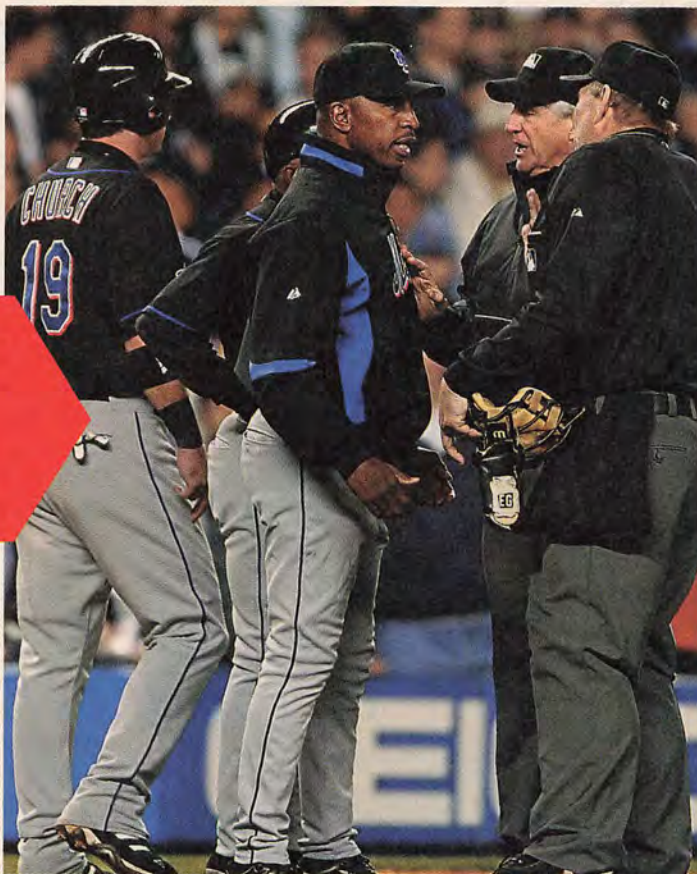
How do G.M.s, players and managers really feel about instant replay?

It all started in the city that never sleeps on a bad call

The instant replay movement really picked up steam in late May. Over the span of about a week, there were a number of home run call disputes, but two—both involving New York teams—stood out. After all, when it happens in a Pirates-Nationals game, it's unfortunate; when it happens in a game in New York, it's borderline catastrophic.

1 On May 18, in a nationally televised Sunday night game at Yankee Stadium, Mets first baseman Carlos Delgado hit what should have been—and initially was—ruled a home run, but the play eventually was ruled a foul ball.

2 On May 21, Yankees third baseman Alex Rodríguez drilled a ball off a staircase beyond the right-center field fence at Yankee Stadium. It was ruled a double, but replays showed the ball cleared the yellow line.



What you need to know about instant replay

Based on the proposal being considered:

■ Managers won't have a say about when replay is used. In other words, there will be no flags thrown from the dugout to challenge a call. Umpires will use replay only when they think it's needed.

■ Replay will not be used to call balls and strikes or for plays on the bases. In fact, those ideas have not even been brought up.

■ A central office in New York will view replays. An official at the office will be notified by the on-site crew chief when a play needs to be reviewed. The official will watch the replay, then relay his view back to the park, but the crew chief will have the final say.

■ There also will be a viewing station at every park. According to a source, making sure technology is in place at all 30 parks is one reason the system was not implemented by August 1, which was the target date at one time.

■ The plan for replay has to be approved by the players association and the umpires union.

—Stan McNeal

How would you limit the use of replay?

Tigers G.M. Dave Dombrowski: "Home runs for fair and foul and in determining if home runs have reached the seats."

Indians G.M. Mark Shapiro: "I would start with home run calls. If this is an overwhelming success, I would consider other fair/foul calls and traps."

Padres G.M. Kevin Towers: "For questionable home run calls, ground-rule doubles, plays down the line and fan interference calls."

Padres closer Trevor Hoffman: "If you're going to do it, you've got to jump in. An extra base in the fourth inning could prove just as important as a ninth-inning home run. Therefore, you can't pick and choose. You can't say, 'OK, now the game's on the line, we're going to watch.'"

Would replay slow the game to an annoying level?

Braves G.M. Frank Wren: "With the specificity of the situation that it can be used in, it's likely that it's only utilized once a week in an entire league."

Shapiro: "If executed properly, it should not take much longer than the current process of umpires' meetings on the field."

Dodgers VP Charles Steinberg: "No more so than a pitching change."

Who should have the final say, the crew chief or home plate umpire?

Wren: "Crew chief."

Dombrowski: "Either one."

Hoffman: "If you're going to bring in the technology, then there has to be a person up in the booth."

Would instant replay remove the human element?

Shapiro: "The human element will always be a part of baseball, but these are calls that impact games and pennants. They need to be gotten right."

Dombrowski: "It has to remove a bit of the human element, but not in abundance."

Is making the correct call the most important thing?

Wren: "Yes."

Hoffman: "Absolutely. Once you bring in technology, there's going to be even more preciseness to their calls, like going from 99 to 99.9 percent. But the ultimate goal is the same."

Steinberg: "Preserving the integrity of the game is the most important thing. The game, in its perfection, includes errors. The inhuman elements of baseball are perfect. Natural grass, real dirt, naturally occurring limestone, wood bats, yarn-and-hide balls, mud from the New Jersey side of the Delaware River. It's the human element—always imperfect yet always striving for perfection, albeit futilely, that is its tug."

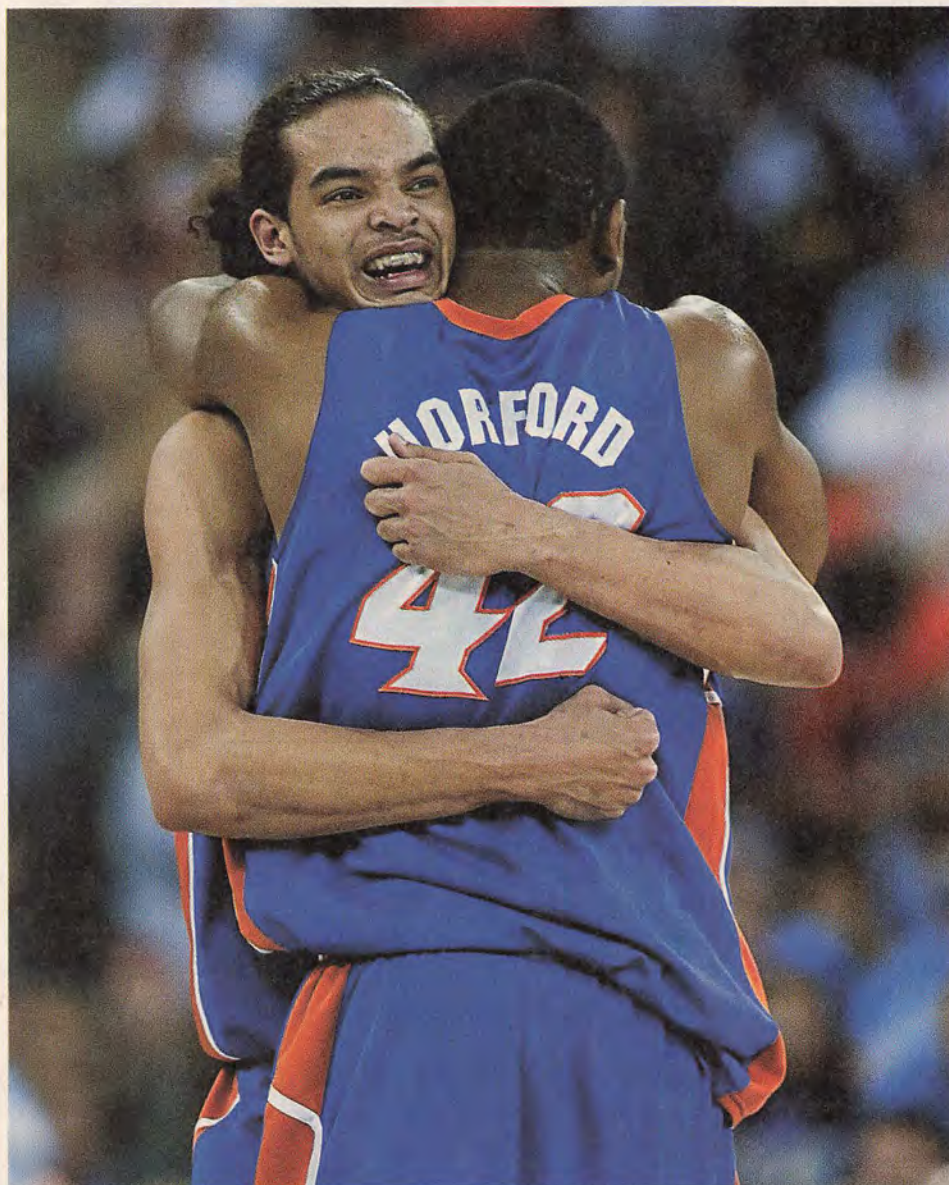
How important is replay to you?

Royals G.M. Dayton Moore: "It's not that big a deal. I don't think there really would be that many times when it would be used."

Cardinals manager Tony La Russa: "I don't think about it much. They'll tell us what to do and how it works, and we'll go on from there." **SN**

If you want predictions, just look to the recent past.

You ready? I'm bringing back 2006



By Mike DeCourcy

decourcy@sportingnews.com

So where were you in 2006? Were you pleading to get your \$8.50 returned after wasting 110 minutes on M. Night Shyamalan's *Lady in the Water*? Were you mystified by the success of feckless Taylor Hicks on *American Idol*? Were you dancing along with Justin Timberlake's techno/disco smash "SexyBack," trying in vain to discern any of the

Nobody thought Al Horford, Joakim Noah and the Gators would win the title in 2005-06.

lyrics beyond "I'm bringin' sexy back?"

If it was such a crappy year, why am I bringin' '06 back?

Because we're all in for a little déjà vu.

Yes, 2005-06 was great if you were a Florida Gator, but we all knew going into that season a substandard freshman class would lead to a lower quality of play. After two years of feasting our eyes on the likes of Greg Oden, Kevin Durant, Michael

Beasley and Derrick Rose, we're looking at a similar vacuum this winter.

Of course, less artistic college basketball is still college basketball. There are few better ways to pass the time. But to understand what to expect this season, it's wise not to forget lessons learned from 2005-06.

Even the best better improve. Whereas their Final Four brethren saw their rosters depleted by early entry, this year's North Carolina Tar Heels got back everyone who thought about leaving for the NBA draft. They have such an immense edge in proven talent it's hard even to take a contrarian stance in support of another national title candidate.

But three years ago, Connecticut had future first-round draft picks Josh Boone, Marcus Williams, Rudy Gay and Hilton Armstrong and still didn't win it all. The Huskies lacked chemistry and passion and never found a sense of rhythm even while winning 30 games.

As long as North Carolina has Tyler Hansbrough, passion will not be an issue. But the Heels must connect better than they did last season and improve during the year as a defensive unit and a halfcourt offensive team. A basketball team that stops growing usually finds itself at home before the trophy is awarded.

Somebody's in the weeds. *Sporting News* was one of the few outlets that did not predict Florida would disappear completely from the scene after Anthony Roberson, Matt Walsh and David Lee left in the spring of 2005. We said the Gators would be "more fun." We did not mean we thought they would win the national championship. We meant somebody in the program might actually pass the ball.

It turned out the Gators had three future top 10 picks on their roster—none of whom had played much the previous year. It's hard to picture that sort of miracle being repeated so soon, but the talent of Michigan State's Kalin Lucas, Durrell Summers and Chris Allen was put only to sporadic use last season. Gonzaga's Austin Daye averaged only 18.5 minutes but—with his 6-10 height, extraordinary length and complete package of scoring skills—might be the most promising offensive prospect in the college game.

Freshmen can't change everything. In 2007-08, four of the nation's top 40 scorers were freshmen. Compare that with our not so magical 2005-06 season, when only two freshmen ranked in the

speedreads

It's amazing many North Carolina message board posters claim they cannot root for the U.S. Olympic basketball team because Duke's Mike Krzyzewski is coach. So what's next? Is Will Blythe going to write a sequel to his clever book about North Carolina fandom and call it *To Hate Like This Is To Pull For Spain*?

Here is the definition of *underrated*: Rivals.com ranks power forward Erik Murphy of Southborough, Mass., as the No. 69 prospect in the class of 2009. Murphy is 6-10, 220 and has learned the full package of skills from his father, Jay, who starred at Boston College in the 1980s. Erik Murphy will be a great college player.

Among the many things Wake Forest coach Dino Gaudio learned from his late mentor, Skip Prosser: how to handle point guards. According to Scout.com, Gaudio recited one of Prosser's favorite lines in getting a commitment from Philadelphia class of 2010 point guard Tony Chenault. Prosser told his playmakers, including All-American Chris Paul, that he would hand them the ball at the beginning of the game and appreciate it being returned two hours later in good condition.

top 75. Some freshmen will make a significant impact this season, in particular wings Demar DeRozan at USC and Scotty Hopson at Tennessee. Some will provide a missing piece for their teams. But the heavy lifting in most instances will be left to upperclassmen.

The mids are dangerous. When the big-timers aren't drowning in talent, mid-major teams can advance on the strength of their experience. That's why Davidson—even without extraordinary point guard Jason Richards—has the chance to improve upon last year's Elite Eight finish. The Wildcats feature one of the country's elite players, guard Stephen Curry, and have most of the frontcourt players who complemented him last season.

When Australian Andrew Bogut returned from competing in the 2004 Olympics, he had gained the confidence to become an All-American. Fellow Aussie Patrick Mills, a scoring point guard, is the only college player at the 2008 Games, and he played well against Chris Paul and Deron Williams in the teams' final tuneup game. That will not hurt Saint Mary's attempt to break through to NCAA success.

And, like Drake last year, some team from some mid-major league is going to emerge as a force—and will be more dangerous this year because the big-time programs generally won't. **SN**

When Cincinnati accepted a commitment from C **John Riek**, it did so with the promise that Riek intended to play at least two years with the Bearcats. Riek had entered the 2008 NBA draft after splitting a postgraduate year between the Winchendon Academy and the IMG training facility but withdrew after receiving minimal interest from NBA teams—and tearing a knee ligament that required surgery. Riek should be healthy enough to play by December. He could contribute as a shot-blocking defender, but he needs plenty of time to

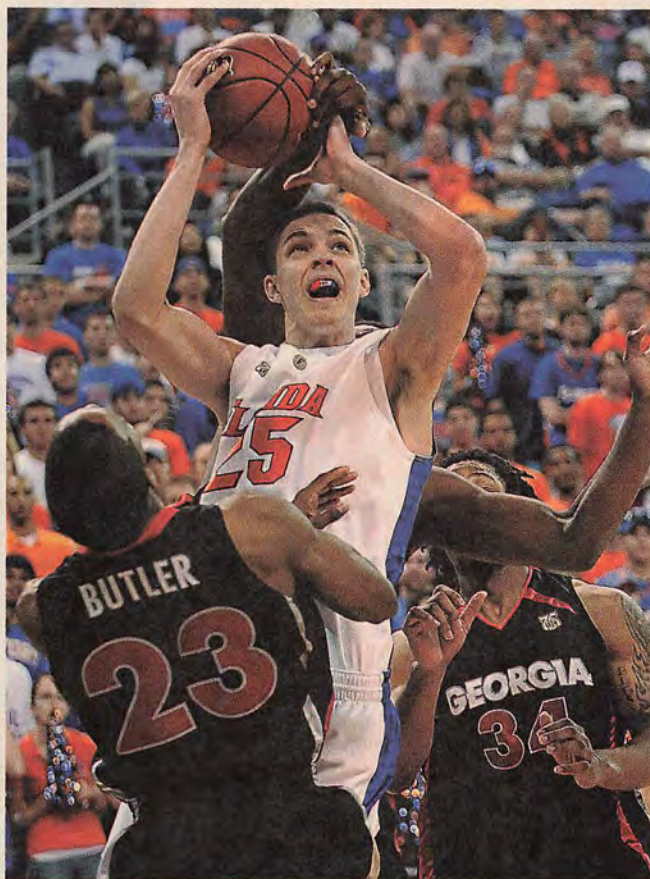
grow his offensive game and work with Cincy's excellent strength coach, **Dave Andrews**, to have any chance at succeeding in the NBA. When the idea that Riek would stay at least into his sophomore season was mentioned, Riek's advisers responded enthusiastically. > Washington has struggled at the point guard position the past two years; no player averaged even four assists in 2007-08. But the arrival of tiny **Isaiah Thomas**—he's listed at 5-8, 170—could be a huge lift for the Huskies' attack. His club coach with the Seattle-based Friends of Hoop team, **Jim Marsh**, promises Thomas will create challenges for Pac-10 defenders with his end-to-end speed and crossover dribble. Thomas, who spent last year attending prep school at South Kent in Connecticut, was a huge scorer in high school, but he'll

need to adjust to involving his teammates more. He played on successful Friends of Hoop teams with former Huskies C **Spencer Hawes**. > With a player who shoots as frequently as class of 2009 SG **Kenny Boynton** of Plantation, Fla., some scouts wonder whether his game can fit into a championship setting. But Boynton blew away those concerns by teaming with junior

INSIDE DISH

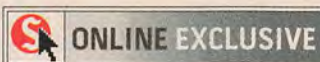
PG **Brandon Knight** to lead his club, Team Breakdown, to titles at the Reebok Summer Championships in Las Vegas and the AAU U-17 national title. That's only going to escalate the intensity of Boynton's recruitment. He is considering Texas, Memphis and Georgia Tech, but the schools believed to have the best chance at landing Boynton are Florida and Duke. > When Florida ran its recent elite camp—which Boynton attended, as did red-hot junior SF **Harrison Barnes** of Ames, Iowa—Gators sophomore SF **Chandler Parsons**

showed off his growing game. He arrived on campus last summer standing 6-9 and weighing less than 200 pounds, but he is up to 218 and using his increased strength to play with greater confidence. He has improved as a ball-handler, which allows him to be more aggressive offensively, and he also should raise his 32.4 3-point percentage.



Parsons didn't make much noise last season—he averaged 8.1 points—but now he's bigger and better with the ball.

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Mike DeCourcy caught up with Connecticut point guard A.J. Price, who is rehabbing from knee surgery. Read their conversation at sportingnews.com.

Only one team will make it out of the West, but this is the time of year when championship dreams spring up like crab grass.

Everybody's a winner!

By Sean Deveney

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It's summer, and that means lazing on the beach, twilight softball games and small children in too-big hats eating half-melted ice cream. Dewy lemonade and convertibles. Flip flops and shades. You get the idea. Summer is no time for negative thoughts.

In this serene frame of mind, let's consider one of the weighty issues of today's NBA: geography. For whatever reason, the bulk of the league's best players now work to the left of the Mississippi River, which makes the Western Conference a minefield almost impossible to navigate.

Eight teams in the West won 50 or more games last season, and the Warriors set a record for most wins (48) by a team that did not qualify for the postseason. Your team might win 50 games, like last season's Nuggets, Rockets, Suns and Mavericks, and get run out of the playoffs in the first round—and then have to spend the offseason parting ways with a coach (Dallas and Phoenix), selling off a top defensive player (Denver) or taking a risk on Ron Artest, the loosest cannon in sports (Houston).

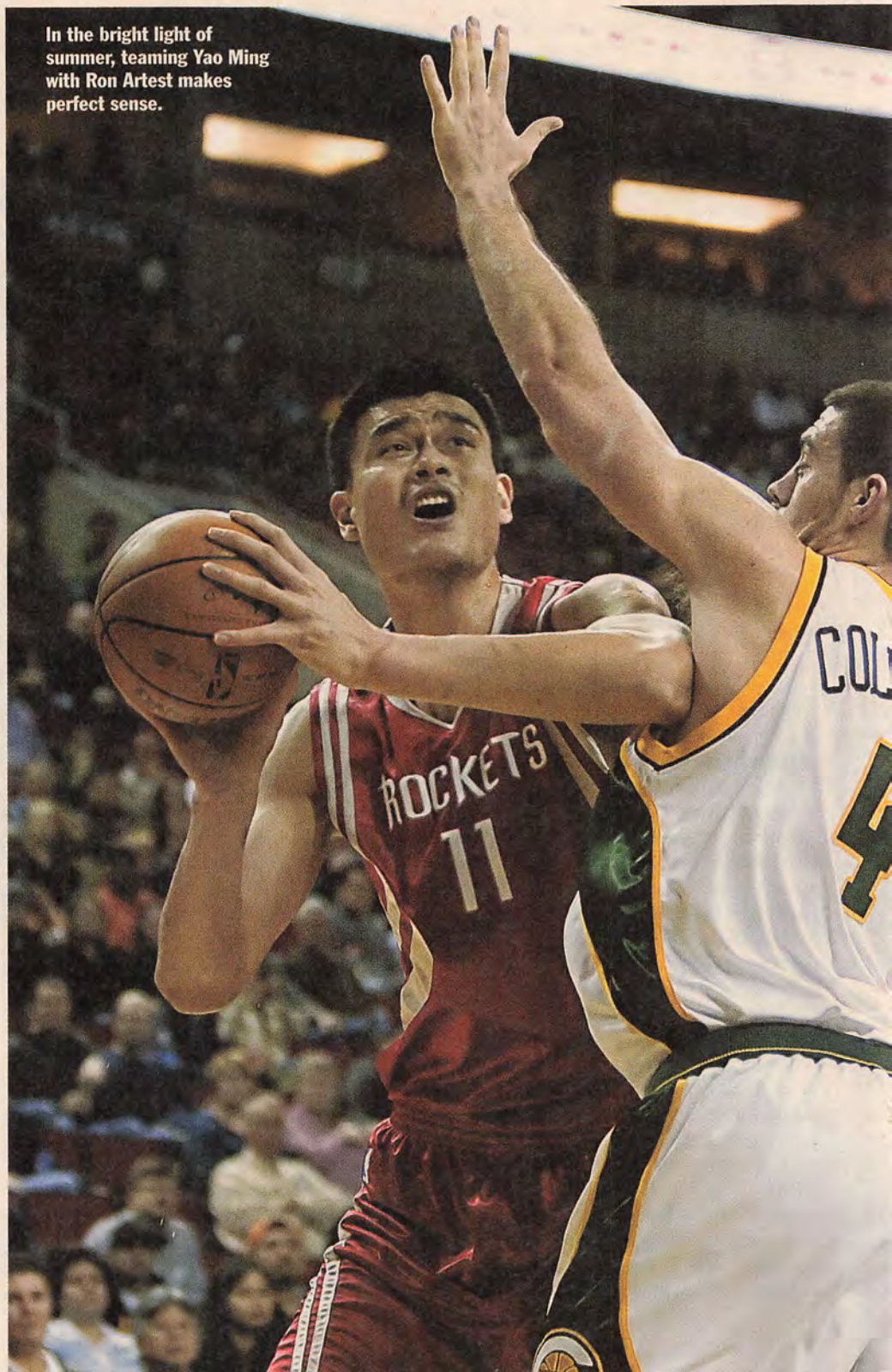
But remember, this is summer. And that means positive vibes and talk of winning. Thus, when free-agent guard Brent Barry agrees to terms with the Rockets, he says, "Obviously, the Houston Rockets are not far off from competing for a championship." Or when point guard Baron Davis signs with the Clippers, he says, "the possibilities are endless to be able to win a championship." And the arrival of swingman James Posey in New Orleans prompts coach Byron Scott to declare, "It obviously puts us a step closer to our ultimate goal, which is winning a championship."

Positivity is contagious, no matter how hopeless the West landscape appears. So, with everyone's inner realist groaning just a little, let's paint a rosy picture of the conference and a path to The Finals for, say, 11 of the 15 teams, which should be enough to keep those positive vibes flowing.

Lakers. The path back to The Finals is clear: The return of young center Andrew Bynum will make them championship favorites.

Spurs. San Antonio won titles in 2003, '05 and '07. The Spurs have a remarkable opportunity to become the first team to win four straight nonconsecutive championships in odd-numbered years.

In the bright light of summer, teaming Yao Ming with Ron Artest makes perfect sense.



Hornets. They could not beat the Spurs last season, but their seven-game beauty of a series provided valuable experience. Chris Paul and David West will improve, and they've added a pocketful of Posey. They're ready for the next step.

Jazz. Deron Williams and Carlos Boozer are coming into their prime years, Ronnie Brewer gives them (finally) a legit shooting guard, and Andrei Kirilenko is back from the brink. A playoff breakthrough might be next.

Suns. New coach Terry Porter will slow it down, get these guys to play playoff-level D and have them ready for late April. Then, he'll keep his fingers crossed for a Shaq revival.

Mavericks. New coach Rick Carlisle will slow it down, get these guys to play playoff-level D and have them ready for late April. Then, he'll keep his fingers crossed for a Jason Kidd revival.

Rockets. They need to let Artest do his thing on the floor, then take anything off the floor with a grain of salt. Or a shaker of salt. He could be the tough dude this team desperately needs.

Nuggets. Kenyon Martin showed flashes of his old self down the stretch last season. If Nene can do the same, they won't miss Marcus Camby at all.

Trail Blazers. Too young? Probably. But the championship-level talent is there, so there's always a chance it could come together quickly.

Warriors. The focus is on the future, but Stephen Jackson and Corey Maggette can make this team an offensive force in the present.

Clippers. What the heck. It's summer, when even the Clippers can be contenders. **SN**

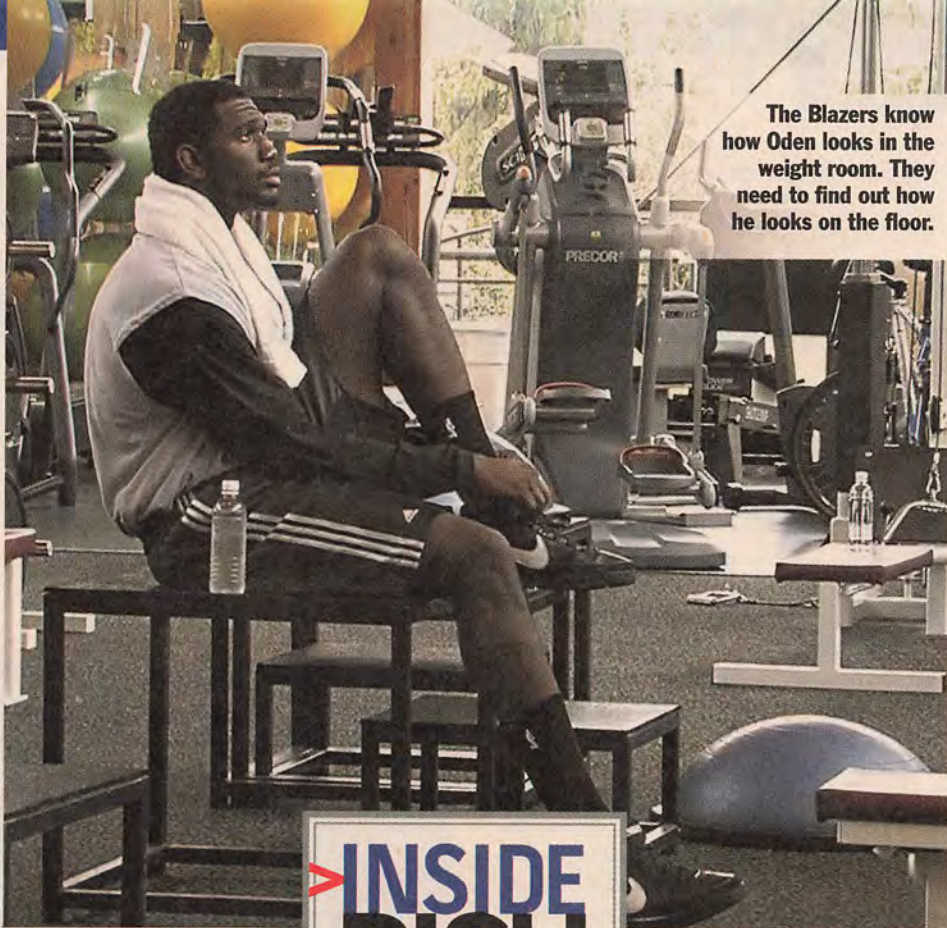
ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Check out Sean Deveney's expert analysis after every Team USA basketball game as part of the daily Olympic coverage at sportingnews.com.

speedreads

Within days of declaring himself the best player in the game, Celtics G Paul Pierce was pulled over in Las Vegas for erratic driving and handcuffed. It turns out Pierce really didn't do anything wrong. And why would anyone be surprised that Pierce—coming off a championship—called himself the league's best player? He was feeling his oats, and why shouldn't he have been?

There was a collective sigh of relief in Charlotte when the Bobcats signed center Emeka Okafor. The franchise has been losing money, and some questioned whether it would shell out a big, long-term contract. Okafor's \$72 million deal quelled that fear.



The Blazers know how Oden looks in the weight room. They need to find out how he looks on the floor.

INSIDE DISH

Trail Blazers C **Greg Oden** has completed almost a year of rehabilitation on his right knee, which was repaired by microfracture surgery last September. Now comes the real challenge for Portland: figuring out what to do with its talented young big man.

With F/C **LaMarcus Aldridge**, PF **Ike Diogu**, PF **Channing Frye** and C **Joel Przybilla**, the Blazers have a crowd up front. Ideally, Oden will become the starting center, but until the Blazers are certain his knee will hold up, they'll proceed cautiously. There could be a good market for Przybilla's shot-blocking prowess, but that option depends on Oden's level of recovery. ➤ The Pistons seemed poised to make major moves this offseason. While announcing the firing of coach **Flip Saunders** in early June, G.M. **Joe Dumars** said, "There are no sacred cows here. You lose that sacred cow status when you lose three straight years." But new coach **Michael Curry** says that doesn't necessarily mean the Pistons will pull off a major deal. Curry calls second-year G **Rodney Stuckey** a sixth starter and says the team's other young backups—G **Arron Affalo**, SF **Amir Johnson** and PF **Jason Maxiell**—will eventually be the core of the team. ➤ Lakers C **Andrew Bynum**, another young player coming off knee surgery, also has been declared fit to play. Bynum was cleared for conditioning

and basketball activities by his doctor, New York Mets orthopedic surgeon **David Altchek**. Bynum was having a breakout season for

the Lakers—averaging 13.1 points, 10.2 rebounds and 2.1 blocks—when he injured his knee in January. He is not expected to have any lingering problems from the surgery. ➤ Magic G.M. **Otis Smith** thinks his signing of G/F **Mickael Pietrus** may turn out to be a steal. One of Orlando's weaknesses last season was defending shooting guards, and Pietrus is a first-rate defender. But Smith says there's more. "He can shoot 3-pointers, and with the offense we run, that's very important. He is a great shooter on corner 3s. We know what he can do defensively, but we think he has more potential on the offensive end, too." ➤ The big question about Oklahoma City (you used to know this team as the Sonics) is not whether rookie PG **Russell Westbrook** will become a starter but when. Oklahoma City has PGs **Earl Watson** and **Luke Ridnour** already on the roster, but Westbrook's defense and the ease with which he picked up the team's offense in summer-league play has made one of those two expendable. Watson and Ridnour have similar contracts—two years with about \$13 million remaining—and are expected to draw interest from other teams.

If two heads are indeed better than one, the unusual G.M. arrangement in Dallas might just land the team in the finals.

Success could be in the Stars

By Craig Custance

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Les Jackson is prudence to Brett Hull's passion. He's patience to Hull's panache. And this yin and yang of NHL general managers is working to perfection in Dallas. Last week, the Stars introduced summer free-agent addition Sean Avery, and though Hull was elsewhere getting in some final vacation time, his co-G.M. Jackson was charged with running the meet-and-greet between Avery and the local media.

Avery's signing was no doubt Hull's idea, even if he wasn't there for the intro. The two were roommates with the Red Wings, and the admiration in Avery's voice was clear when he spoke about Hull.

The admiration of a young hockey fan who in 1992 brought a sign to Maple Leaf Gardens with the message "Hull of a Shot"—but was too embarrassed to hold it up.

The admiration of the NHL neophyte who, while playing—and living—with Hull in Detroit, now admits he probably took on Hull's persona a little too early in his career.

"I don't think I was ready to do that," says Avery, 28, who left the Rangers to come to Dallas.

And while Avery gushed about Hull, there sat Jackson, meeting his biggest summer addition for the first time.

After handing Avery his first Stars jersey, Jackson was handed back Avery's designer coat and observed that "this is the nicest jacket I've ever held."

Maybe the most expensive, too.

Even on a day that was about celebrating Avery's signing, the money-cruncher in Jackson couldn't help but reveal his hesitancy to give up big contracts to free agents. Big contracts that buy fancy jackets.

"When you get to July 1—terms and dollars, you don't want to go there. But sometimes you go there," Jackson said, tap-dancing around the idea—while never actually saying—that Avery's four-year deal for \$15.5 million was an overpayment.

That's what makes the Hull-Jackson duo so good. Hull was passionate in his case to sign Avery, especially when a deal couldn't be worked out for the defenseman Jackson preferred.

And Jackson listened. Even if he wasn't crazy about the price tag.

"When you make a trade or draft a player, you want guys to have a passion to bring in that player," Jackson says. "Hully had that passion—why not do it?"

Maybe the Stars don't sign Avery without Hull's nudging. Maybe they don't win a Stanley Cup this season without Avery's well-documented antics.

Avery says he watched the Stars battle the Red

Wings in the Western Conference finals and felt like they were one piece away from getting past Detroit. You can guess who Avery thought that piece might be.

"If you throw me in the lineup in that series, it's definitely going to make the difference," he says.

And you believe him.

Jackson looks at the makeup of his roster head-



Avery (left) may not have been Jackson's first choice, but he'll turn out to be a wise one.

ing into this season and sees the right mix of grit and skill. Of youth and veterans. Of players hungry to win a Cup and guys who know how to do it.

The defending champion Red Wings got better by signing Marian Hossa. San Jose is gaining momentum as the experts' choice. And the Blackhawks seem to have a weekly press conference to announce exciting developments in the Windy City.

But it just might be the Stars of Hull and Jackson who are best poised to make a run in the Western Conference.

In just two years, the team has gotten younger and faster, a necessity in today's game. Goalie Marty Turco looks at recent moves and sees a team better constructed for the playoffs. During this salary cap era of the NHL, a franchise has a distinct

window of opportunity to be an elite contender, and Turco thinks these Stars are smack in the middle of it.

"I can't think of a team out there with a bigger window. We've made great strides the last couple years, and the losing is building up that frustration," he says.

Turco senses excitement in Dallas. From fans, all the way up to the front office. He recently chatted with team president Jeff Cogen, who likes the makeup of the team so much he wants the season to start immediately.

There's that kind of anticipation in Dallas this summer, although Turco, who will turn 33 this week, isn't quite ready to drop the puck.

"I need some time to heal still," he says. "But don't worry, it'll be well worth it." **SN**

speedread

If you want to talk trade, let's go back 20 years to the day the Edmonton Oilers dispatched a Canadian national treasure to Los Angeles. The Wayne Gretzky trade was shocking, emotional and sport-changing, everything the recent Brett Favre soap opera was not. —Ron Smith

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Keep pace with the latest offseason activity throughout the NHL with Craig Custance's daily blog at sportingnews.com.

After years of letting their best players leave for nothing, the Sabres deserve credit for developing a more proactive strategy. It started with trading D **Brian Campbell** at the deadline last season and continued this summer with the team's long-term deal for G **Ryan**

Miller. Now the club hopes to sign RW **Jason Pominville** to a long-term contract before he becomes a restricted free agent next summer. It appears the Sabres are learning from previous mistakes. "That's for sure," says Pominville's agent, **Normand Dupont**. "After the loss of **Daniel Briere** and **Chris Drury** and Campbell, now they signed Ryan Miller. That's a sign they want to keep the good players long-term." Dupont says his client is willing to talk about a long-term deal and has scheduled a trip to Buffalo to see how close the sides are. ➤ After Tampa Bay's prospect camp in British Columbia, coach **Barry Melrose** is convinced that C **Steven Stamkos**, the first overall pick in the 2008 draft, is ready to play in the NHL immediately. Melrose confirms that Stamkos, 18, will have a spot on the roster this season: "Yeah, that's the plan. We sort of compare him to **Patrick Kane** in Chicago. Kane went there as their best player, but (Stamkos) comes in to a much easier environment here. We're certainly counting on him being a top six forward." The more Melrose sees Stamkos, the more he enjoys him—both on the ice and off. "He's an awesome kid," Melrose says. "He mixed in well with the other kids, which I thought was great. He didn't have any false airs about him." ➤ The U.S. National Junior Evaluation Camp

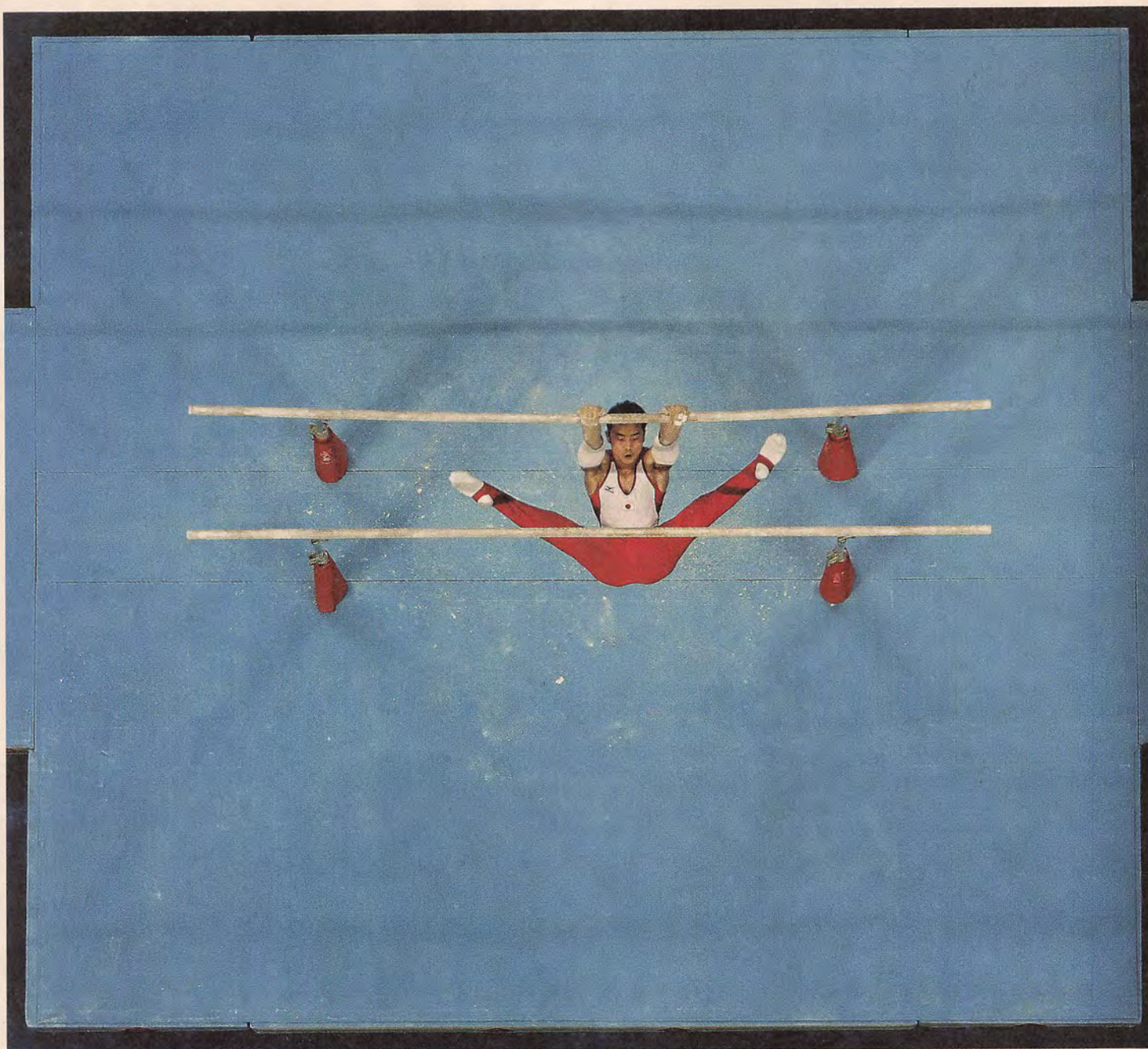
INSIDE DISH



Finally, the Sabres are blocking the departure of their best players, such as Miller.

wrapped up last week, and coach **Ron Rolston** was encouraged by the depth of talent USA Hockey has at its disposal heading into the World Junior Championship in Ottawa. The forwards might not have the scoring punch of the forwards on teams past, but Rolston says his group of defenseman, led by **Zach Bogosian**, is

as deep as he has seen. He has already made a round of cuts and anticipates the next roster trim to be even tougher. "We have a defensive core that will be an extremely tough decision," Rolston says. "There are so many first-round picks, there will be first-round players left off the final roster."



[EXPOSURE]

Parallel universe

For coverage of the Beijing Games—including Japan's Takehiro Kashima and the men's gymnastics competition—check out SportingNews.com's Olympic page, which will have slideshow galleries, up-to-the-minute results, columns and blogs. Plus, get complete daily coverage of the Games in *Sporting News Today*, the nation's first daily digital sports section (sign up for electronic delivery at sportingnewstoday.com).

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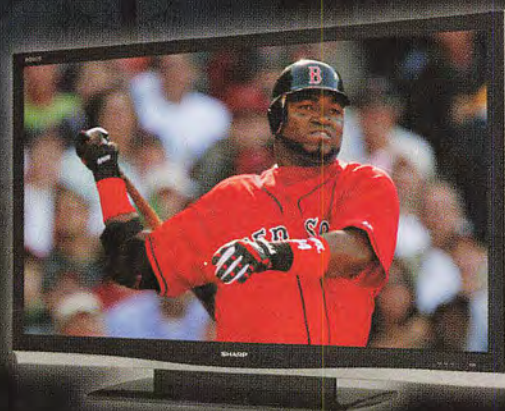
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